

Neopronouns in Action

a compilation of short stories featuring a variety of neopronouns, with the aim of having fun, normalizing neopronouns, and showing people who aren't sure how to use them how easy they are once you learn the rules!

The “genre” will range from scifi, to fantasy, to realistic!

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001: The Mirrored Dream

Neopronouns: ze/hir/(hirs)/hirsself, which will follow the same rules as she/her/(hers)/herself for this story.

Replace "She" with "Ze"

Replace "Her" with "Hir"

Replace "Hers" with "Hirs"

Replace "Herself" with "Hirsself"

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Ze is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ze gets a fence set up around hir yard so the puppy can go outside without hir having to walk it. Hir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting hir use, since ze lots hers. Ze's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

001: The Mirrored Dream

Ze had always been a misfit growing up, for as long as ze could remember. Magical ability ran in hir family, but even so, ze was a strange one. Hir abilities were different from hir mother and father's, even from hir aunts and uncles and all hir cousins. Everyone else in hir family had elemental powers of water, fire, wood, wind, and metal. But hir powers didn't manifest in the ability to control fire or move the air, or bend the water or grow trees or shape metal. Hir magical abilities came in the form of hir dreams, where, for as long as ze had been able to remember, had been more like a second world than anything else, not even close to what hir family members described their dreams as, once ze was old enough to ask them about their worlds, since, not knowing any better, ze'd assumed that what ze dreamt was normal.

It wasn't.

Other people didn't have entire worlds and landscapes in their dreams that they came back to night after night without fail, and most people weren't even able to remember their dreams once they woke up, while ze could remember any detail as clearly as ze could remember the things that happened while ze was awake.

It wasn't until ze was nine that ze really began to understand the scope of hir power, what ze could do with it. It wasn't just another world in hir dreams, it was a mirror world. The people ze spoke to there were reflections of the people in this world, reflections of hir family and friends and village. The things ze did there affected hir waking world, and hir waking world affected the dreaming world.

When ze was nine, ze stole a bracelet in hir dreaming world, because even there hir family didn't have much money, and ze wanted it desperately. When ze woke up again, ze realized with shock that a bracelet was around hir wrist, different to the one in hir dream, but the same. A mirror image. Ze had stolen it in hir dream, and so stole it in the waking world.

Ze took off the bracelet immediately and hid it under hir bed, overwhelmed with confusion that was warring with quickly rising guilt. Ze had stolen it from Ki Beya, the craftsman who lived down the road, and he was supposed to be coming over to their house for dinner later that evening.

He didn't make any mention of a bracelet being stolen, but ze didn't ask, either, too afraid to hear the answer.

That night in hir dream, ze snuck the bracelet back into the display

case, and when ze woke up again, it was no longer hidden under hir bed.

And when ze walked down the street, ze saw it displayed in Ki Beya's shop window just as it had been before, in the exact spot ze'd placed it in the dream.

Now four years later, ze was thirteen, and ze needed to figure out how to use this ability to save hir sister's life.

002: A Different Perspective

Neopronouns: vi/vir/vis/virself, which will follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this story.

Replace he with vi

Replace him with vir

Replace his with vis

Replace himself with virself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

“Vi is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as vi gets a fence set up around vis yard so the puppy can go outside without vir having to walk it. Vis uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting vir use, since vi lost vis. Vi's going to buy toys and train the puppy virself. ”

002: A Different Perspective

Vi was born under blood moons, and so spent the first thirty years of vis life in the Maw of Kyrun, being taught the skills required of all blood hunters.

Vi learned how to focus vis sight to see past the energy and into the body world, the realm that very few kiyal who were born under other moons would ever even get a glimpse of. There were a rare few who had the ability, of course, because nothing could ever be neat or simple, but they were few and far between, and it was even rarer for any of them to match up to even the weakest of blood hunters.

On vis thirty-first anniversary of life, vi was discharged from the Maw of Kyrun after the ceremony of degradation, that would make vis status as a blood hunter official in all the laws of the world. Vi was now qualified to take contracts for anyone who required the services of a blood hunter, with the Maw of Kyrun to be held personally responsible for any misbehavior on vis part, so that the contractors would feel secure in bargaining for vis services.

Now a free to travel wherever vi wished, the first thing vi did was head north, towards the pole. Vi'd read so many stories about the atmosphere there, it had always been vis dream to visit once vi

graduated, and now vi had that chance. The Maw of Nuryk had been built right on top of the maelstrom, chained into place by the careful work of thousands of workers and scholars so that it would not budge a heartbeat out of place even if the world ended tomorrow.

They would welcome vir into their ranks happily, and vi would take vir turn fulfilling whatever menial tasks the Maw required for its various forms of upkeep when vi was not currently under contract. A third of vis payment would go to the Maw of Nuryk while vi was sheltered there, and the leadership would in return use that payment to continue trading resources and communications with the Maw of Kyrun, and, further south, the Maw of Yrunk, and to the east, the Maw of Unkyr.

There were other Maws out there, further away, too far for easy communication, and though vi had studied their history while vi was younger, the information hadn't been crucial, and so it had faded with time, overwhelmed by all the other things vi had learned that were more pressing and important.

Like how to descend safely, and make sure you would be able to ascend again. How to carry someone back with you if they fell, how to interact with the body world without becoming trapped, how to communicate with the benevolent bodies, and most importantly, how

to track and banish or kill the bodies, sometimes called projections, that entered their world.

Vi had already ventured down into the body world several times while vi was still an apprentice so that the older, more experienced blood hunters could demonstrate the proper techniques. It was one thing to be told how to do something, to study diagrams, it was another entirely to be there in the body world trying to do it properly yourself.

The task had been to communicate with the local benevolent body that had worked with the Maw of Kyrun for generations, helping to guide the younger students down the right path.

Parsing its style of communicating had been vis most challenging lesson in vis whole life. Vi could not simply watch and listen, vi needed to sink deep into meditation, and feel the vibrations the body's voice sent through the atmosphere. Vis task was to establish clear, two-way communication, and to prove that vi was able to communicate with the body—whose name, vi had been told, was Silver Metal—vi had to find the well-hidden body object that Silver Metal guided vir to, then the reverse, with vir guiding Silver Metal to the symphoric object the elder blood hunters had sunken down into the body world and hidden, with its location only revealed to vir

once vi had found the first object.

Silver Metal, as a body, had been alien and strange, but not as frightening as vi had been afraid of. Yes, it was dense, almost solid, but there was the slightest hint of sympherory that resonated from it at all times, and that, vi was told, by Silver Metal itself, was how they were able to communicate.

Vi would not be able to see Silver Metal again unless vi returned to the Maw of Kyrun, but there would be other local bodies near the Maw or Nuryk, some of them benevolent, who would help vi in vis tasks when necessary, and some of them wicked. These were the ones vi would help to track down when they invaded the real world, and depending on their level of hostility and their ability to inflict damage, they would either be banished, or killed outright.

Vi had never had to kill a wicked body yet, or even met one. The Maw of Kyrun had a large network of benevolent bodies surrounding it, and they did their part to stop the wicked bodies before they could breach the sympheric world. This would not be the case at the pole, which was another of the many reasons vi had chosen it as vis first station.

The number of wicked bodies intruding into the real world had been

rising there for the past few years, with more and more blood hunters being drawn in to deal with it. No where else within travel distance needed as much assistance as the pole did, and vis job was to help, above all else, so that's where vi would go.

003: Werewolves

Neopronouns: card/cards, which will follow the same rules as it/its/itself for this example.

Replace it with card

Replace its with cards

Replace itself with cardself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

“Card is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as card gets a fence set up around cards yard so the puppy can go outside without card having to walk it. Cards uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting card use, since card lost cards. Card's going to buy toys and train the puppy cardself. ”

003: Werewolves

It all started at exactly 4:32PM. Card knew that, because card had been specifically checking the time to write down when it got dark outside. It was a personal project, card'd been keeping track all year so far of the time when it got, in cards opinion, too dark outside to go out. Mostly because card hated winter, and hated having to be stuck inside for what felt like half th day, and so card had decided that card would write down the time each day, so card would be able to see when it began to get later and later as winter turned to spring and then, eventually, to summer.

So card knew for an absolute fact that the howling started at exactly 4:32PM.

And it sounded like it was coming from the woods right next to cards house, loud enough that even through the closed windows, card could hear the individual voices clearly.

There were at least four of them, maybe more, card couldn't tell. But four of them stood out clearly from the rest, recognizable because of the different tones of their voices.

Werewolves.

There was no other possibility. Wolves were native to this area, but they weren't scheduled to be reintroduced until next month. Card had had it marked on cards calender since the year before. There was going to be a huge party to celebrate it, to collect donations and raise further awareness and push for more reintroductions and protections for the native wildlife.

Card didn't know of any werewolf packs nearby, or even within day-trip distance. Card had done cards research, hoping to find someone who would be willing to turn card.

The benefits of being a werewolf far outweighed the cons, as far as card was concerned, and card really didn't understand how other people could think otherwise.

Now there were at least four werewolves, in the woods right outside cards house, howling up a storm, marking their territory.

Card had always wanted to be a werewolf, ever since card had learned that it was something you could become, but this was probably the worst timing in the world.

It was already dark out, too dark for card to just go traipsing through the woods looking for werewolves, and it was October, cards birth

month, and it was that time of the month.

Card had thought cards luck had been terrible before! Every time there was an opportunity to go swimming? Oops, nope! Sorry, better luck next week! And now there were werewolves out in the woods! Card was too tired and in too much pain to go wandering around in the woods in the dark at night in the cold with cramps. That was just too high a price, especially if card didn't even now if any of the werewolves would be willing to transform card next month.

If they would even still be here next month. Did they know about the soon to be reintroduction of the red wolves to this area? Had they come just for that purpose, or was this a coincidence?

In many of the other places around the country where wolves had been reintroduced, werewolf packs had moved in to protect them. Unfortunately, there were still plenty of people who hated wolves, and would kill them on sight if they had the chance. But the protection of a pack of werewolves—especially a larger pack, was a force to be reckoned with.

Propaganda-poisoned people with access to guns were afraid of wolves, but they were more afraid of werewolves.

The howling stopped suddenly, at 4:37 exactly.

Five minutes exactly of howling, which means they probably had a stopwatch with them, or it was a song they all knew by heart.

Card was just turning towards cards computer desk to see if card could find any information on werewolf packs that had moved into the area recently...

And then the window right behind cards computer was smashed inward, and all hell broke very abruptly loose.

004: The Interworld Growing Club:

Neopronouns: it/its/itself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

004: The Interworld Growing Club:

It was the first human to join the transworld growing club, and it brought *Sambucus canadensis*, *Diospyros virginiana*, *Prunus caroliniana*, and *Passiflora incarnata* seedlings with it as the four traditional gifts.

Each new member brought with them four species native to their planet that weren't already included in the collective.

It wasn't the first new member to join, or the only first of its species - on the same planetary cycle (defined by the system's governing council as being forty-seven hours long), the first seyeir also joined, and zainun brought four species whose names the human couldn't remember how to pronounce (and thus, remember) yet.

Most of the other members of the club had never met a human before, since they were still so new to having interstellar travel capabilities, so the pre-approved list of questions it was okay to ask almost got used up entirely.

How often did it need to sleep? What did it eat? How often did it need to eat? What did it drink? Did it eat the species it had brought with it? Were the species it had brought with it pets? Did it have any

pets, and if it was safe, could they meet them?

How often did it need to sleep? Was it telepathic? Did it have any disabilities among its species? Could it smell their pheromones? Could it see their colors? Did it know what dreams were? Did it dream? Did it remember its dreams? Was this its first time leaving Earth? How many planets had it gone to? How many space stations had it gone to?

What was the spaceship it had come here in called? What was its favorite color? What was its favorite sound? Did it have a favorite time? What was its favorite food?

How many genders did humans have? What was its gender? What were its pronouns? If it was attracted to any genders, what kinds of genders was it attracted to, and how?

Would it be interested in courting an alien? Did humans lay eggs? Did humans reproduce by budding? How did it get its name? Did it have any siblings or parents or friends?

How long could it stand? How much weight could it lift? Did it take any medicines? What should they do if it was injured and couldn't help itself? What should they do if it stopped breathing?

How long could it survive in the vacuum of space? What should they do if it was exposed to the vacuum? What should they do if it got too hot? What should they do if it got too cold?

What kinds of foods could it eat? Would it show them how humans cooked and ate the species it was gifting to the collective?

The last question would take a while to come to fruition, because the seedlings it had brought with it were still very small, and wouldn't produce fruit for anywhere from a few months to several years. And the *Prunus caroliniana* wasn't edible for humans, but the on-station medical experts had concluded that the fruits would be edible for several of the other member species, which was why it had chosen it as one of the gift species. The other three were edible for humans, and for half a dozen member species, each.

Three other members were delighted that it used it/its pronouns, just like they did, though they each described their genders very differently than it did.

Once the questions were done, it was led on a tour of the communal growing area, where, safely contained behind several layers of state-of-the-art forcefields, physical walls, airlocks, and other safeguards to prevent any escapes, all of the hundreds of species that had been

gifted to the growing club were cultivated in a self-contained, self-sustaining, completely unique ecosystem.

Each new species was carefully integrated into the rest so that its outputs and inputs would work in a careful balance with the rest of the system, so that each species got what it needed, and gave what it didn't. The species weren't limited to what humans called plants, either, since most non-Earth species didn't conform to anything that could easily be categorized within the normal Earth standards. What humans called plants, animals, and mushrooms were all involved, as well as hundreds of species human taxonomists hadn't even begun to think about sorting.

The four species the human had brought with it would be given their place, once they were studied and understood by the club members who were most familiar with the system, and until then, they had much to teach the human, who was more than happy to learn, and ask its own questions.

005: Reclamation

Neopronouns ae/aer/(aers)/aerself which will follow the same rules as she/her/(hers)/herself for this example.

Replace she with ae

Replace her with aer

Replace hers with aers

Replace herself with aerself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Ae is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ae gets a fence set up around aer yard so the puppy can go outside without aer having to walk it. Aer uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting aer use, since ae lost aers."

Ae's going to buy toys and train the puppy aerself. ”

005: Reclamation

By day ae was known by one name, one face. And by night, or by the shadows, ae was known by another.

During the day ae had to put on an act - dress a certain way, talk a certain way, act a certain way, behave the way society expected aer to behave. And society expected aer to be meek and quiet and fragile and reserved.

By night, ae could be whoever ae wanted to be, and do whatever ae wanted to do.

What ae wanted to do was steal from the rich, and give to the poor. Take from the wealthy bastards who 'owned' the mines and worked the laborers to death and claimed they were the rightful owners of the gold the laborers dug up and died for. Ae wanted to snatch the food out of their hands so ae could give it to those who didn't have any. Rip the clothes off their backs to give to those who were freezing.

Ae had to hide who ae were during the day, wearing clothes ae hated and having to pretend to be shy and 'traditional' in order to fend off the unwanted advances from men ae would never be attracted to,

never allowed a moment to express aer true feelings or thoughts or wishes, not even around aer brother.

Aer brother. Who'd leapt at the chance to become the marshal, the enforcer of the laws and rules that oppressed so many of their people. He thought he was above it all, better than everyone else. He thought it was their God-given right to be there, to claim ownership over that land, to drive away and oppress the people who'd been there first.

He didn't know what ae did when no one was looking, where ae went when no one was watching.

All it took was a change of clothes, a mask, a wide-brimmed hat, a pilfered rifle, and the courage to stand up for what was right.

Ae went out by aerself to ambush the coaches carrying the rich and their riches from squalid camp to fairway city, draining the life out of the people who labored for them, and all the while doing the same to the land and the people who called it home, one dynamite blast at a time.

Ae ambushed the coaches and stole from the rich. Ae stole their money, their clothes, their food, their tools, their blueprints and

plans, their letters and newspapers. After the first successful theft, ae used the stolen guns, carefully staged within the bushes, to make it seem like ae wasn't alone, like ae was covered on all sides by allies who would open fire the second anyone made a wrong move.

Aer prey was too frightened to risk calling aer bluff, and handed over their valuables without putting up a fight.

Then ae made aer escape, leaving no evidence behind by which ae could be tracked. No one suspected who ae was, the thought would never even enter their minds. They would rather turn suspicious eyes on the coach driver, as though he were somehow responsible, even though he was under just as much threat as the rest of them were.

No one suspected a thing, not even aer brother, who spent most of his time now trying desperately to convince everyone that he had the situation under control.

No one noticed that the poorest of the poor were wearing another layer of clothes beneath their outer layers, and shivering less in the biting wind, or that they complained less of hunger because of the food ae had stolen for them.

No one noticed the poor, and no one noticed aer, or realized who ae was. There was no connection in their minds between the fearsome, unchatchable highway man who terrorized the roads, and the poor, wilting flower that ae had to pretend to be.

What they did notice were the trees they wouldn't be able to cut down any time soon because their saw blades had been stolen. The new quarries they couldn't blast, the animals they couldn't mass-slaughter because ae had stolen the supplies for their ammunition.

Ae could not kill poverty or exploitation, or stop aer people from expanding further west, not on aer own, but ae did aer part to fight it, one stagecoach at a time.

006: I Fucking Hate Athiktomistics

Neopronouns: lu/luna/lunas/lunself, which will follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this example.

Replace he with lu

Replace him with luna

Replace his with lunas

Replace himself with lunself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Lu is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as lu gets a fence set up around lunas yard so the puppy can go outside without luna having to walk it. Lunas uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting luna use, since lu lost lunas."

Lu's going to buy toys and train the puppy lunaself. ”

006: I Fucking Hate Athiktomisics

Lunas fist slammed into their jaw while they were still mid-sentence, cutting off their little speech and turning it into a shocked yelp instead as they went down, knocked to the side by the force of lunas punch.

“Don’t ever say that again.” Lu snapped, glaring down at them.

They stared back at luna in what looked like more shock than anger, holding a hand to their jaw, their eyes wide, the smug grin wiped very effectively off their face, hopefully for the rest of time, but probably not.

Lu turned and stomped away, not sure if lu would be able to stop lunaself from punching them again if they said anything else. Lu didn’t need to have the guards called down on luna again, lu was already in enough trouble after getting caught giving Ocean the extra rations lu didn’t need.

There was no one in the way of luna and the path through the field, so lu turned lunas stomping walk into a run, hoping to burn off the extra anger through physical exertion before lu got to lunas friend’s house and had to explain to them why lu was so angry.

The jerk lu had punched was a bully, lu had figured that out as soon as lu met them after moving here, and they especially loved picking on lunas friend, who was autistic, aroace, and, among many other things, touch-averse.

They didn't like being touched, not even by their friends or family.

The bully knew this, and, being an athiktomistic and amistic jerk, thought it was the funniest thing in the world to pretend to flirt with them, and just now, before lu had punched them, they'd declared that they would win over lunas friend whether they liked it or not, because no one could resist their charms, and no one alive actually really hated being touched, actually hated the idea of being kidded or hugged, they were just saying that to seem cool, playing hard to get. It was impossible for anyone to genuinely dislike being touched.

They'd been in the middle of describing how they'd hug lunas friend and not let go until they gave in and admitted they enjoyed it when lu had punched them in the face to get them to shut up.

The anger was still boiling in luans veins as hot as before, and actually seemed to be getting worse.

Running wasn't actually helping luna stop being angry. It was just giving luna more time to think about why lu was angry, which was just making luna even angrier.

Lu slowed to a walk, and tried to take the time to focus on the plants lu was walking past, noting how they'd grown and changed since the last time lu had gone to lunas friend's house this way. Hoping distractions would help distract luna from the anger. It didn't really work.

But lu didn't want to have to tell lunas friend why lu was so unbearably angry - it would just be cruel to tell them what the bully had said. They didn't need to be stressed out like that for no reason.

Lu was definitely going to punch that jerk again the next time they saw them, even if they didn't say anything. Lunas friend did not deserve to put up with their bullying, no one did. Maybe getting punched in the face would teach them to leave other people alone, maybe it wouldn't. But it would serve them fucking right.

If anyone ever laid a hand on lunas friend without permission, lu was going to make them regret it for the rest of their lives.

007: Creature of Kindness

Neopronouns: de/dim/dis/dimself, which will follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this example.

Replace he with de

Replace him with dim

Replace his with dis

Replace himself with dimself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"De is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as de gets a fence set up around dis yard so the puppy can go outside without dim having to walk it. Dis uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting dim use, since de lost dis. De's

going to buy toys and train the puppy dimself."

007: Creature of Kindness (Inspired by Mary Shelley's Frankenstein)

De waited another month before de revealed himself to the peasants.

They were already aware of dis presence, they had been for all the months that de had been collecting firewood for their stove, and bringing gifts of fruits and greens from the forest to their doorstep each morning before they awoke.

Dis footprints were visible sometimes, after it rained or in the snow - there was no way to hide them. They knew de was there, though they didn't know it was dim, or who de was.

They spoke of dim often, in praise and wonderment, in thanks and prayers for more good fortune. De knew that, without dis assistance, the winter would have been much harder on them. And they knew it too, and often de heard them wondering if their mysterious savior would show themselves, so they could show their gratitude.

Today they would be given the opportunity, and de could only hope, silently within dis heart, that they would greet dim with the same

kindness and compassion that de showed to them.

The night before, de did what de usually did - de went to the forest and gathered wood to refill the pile, and foraged for what fruits and nuts de could find, eating what de needed for dimself, and collecting the rest in the basket for their doorstep.

But rather than leaving it for them to find, this morning, de would be there to hand it to the son or the daughter, whichever opened the door first.

De did not know how they would react, but no amount of imagining or dreaming could predict it for dim. The only way de would ever know how they would react would be to let them react.

De had thought about tricking dis way in, when de was feeling more lonely, entering the house when the son and daughter away, leaving only their blind father, who would not realize anything was strange about dim. But always, de came to dis senses, knowing that trickery would get dim nowhere except to inspire mistrust and fear, and too many things could go wrong, as tempting as the idea was in dis saddest moments.

Morning came, and de waited by their door, the firewood stacked, the basket of food in dis hands. De meant to stand, waiting, but de grew tired from all the work de had done during the night, and eventually had to sit on the ground, the basket now in dis lap.

De had overestimated how much time de would need to return to the house, there was still an hour at least before the family would awake.

De tried to stay awake, but the habit of the past months caught up with dim, and despite dis efforts, de fell asleep where de sat, dis chin falling forward onto dis chest.

So de did not see his reaction when the son opened the door only to see dim sitting there against the wall, sound asleep, nor did de get to hear the conversation they whispered behind the quickly shut door.

The next thing de knew, de was being awoken by the soft voice of the son, his hand gentle on dis shoulder, welcoming dim to their home, asking if de would like to come inside and share breakfast with them, tell them about dimself.

De was flustered and embarrassed about being found asleep, but that quickly gave way beneath dis joy and relief. They were not afraid, they were not angry. They were welcoming dim into their home with

open arms.

De handed the basket to the daughter, and the son helped him to his feet, seeming almost awed.

De followed the peasants into their home, invited, welcomed, and a friend forever more.

008: The Chain of Command

Neopronouns:

Zey/zem/zeir/(zeirs)zemself

X/Xself

ne/rix/riv/rixelf

zey/zem will follow the same rules as
they/them/their/(theirs)themselves for this example.

Replace they with zey

Replace them with zem

Replace their with zeir

Replace themselves with zemself

EX:

Zey/zem:

"They are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as they get a fence set up around their yard so the puppy can go outside without them having to walk it. Their uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting them use, since they lost theirs. They're going to buy toys and train the puppy themselves."

Becomes:

"Zey are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as zey get a fence set up around zeir yard so the puppy can go outside without zem having to walk it. Zeir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting zem use, since zey lost zeirs. Zey're going to buy toys and train the puppy zemself."

* *

X/Xself. All pronouns are replaced with "X" or "Xself".

"X is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as X gets a fence set up around X yard so the puppy can go outside without X having to walk it. X uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting X use, since X lost X. X's going to buy toys and train the puppy Xself. "

* *

Ne/rix/riv/rixelf, following the same rules as he/him/his/himself:

Replace he with ne

Replace him with rix

Replace his with riv

Replace himself with rixelf

"Ne is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ne gets a fence set up around riv yard so the puppy can go outside without rix having to walk it. Riv uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting rix use, since ne lost riv. Ne's going to buy toys and train the puppy rixelf. "

008 The Chain of Command

Zey were frozen in place, not even daring to breathe from the shock and fear. All zeir systems were either sounding the alarm, or just as frozen as zey were, lagging in the sudden rush of adrenaline that zeir organic parts had dumped into zeir bloodstream, overwhelming zeir emergency response systems.

This one one of the pitfalls of combining organic and mechanic systems. Sometimes, the organic instincts won out, even when it was the worst possible response to a situation.

A Rogue was standing less than five feet away. X'd just jumped down from the platform above, landing with X back to zem, leaving zem with nothing to do but to hope and pray to any spirits or gods or demons that might be listening that X somehow hadn't seen zem, and wouldn't turn around to see that zey were standing there, in plain view, without even an alcove to hide in -

The Rogue turned around.

Zey wanted to scream, or just disappear into the wall and die. Terror was making zeir organic hearts pound faster than zey could ever remember, and zeir systems couldn't handle the strain. Zey wanted

to run, but the mechanic parts in zeir legs wouldn't obey zeir desperate commands to move.

Zey'd seen the same training videos everyone else had, heard the same horror stories, seen the lists of casualties.

Rogues were soldiers who'd broken the Chain of Command, and they left a trail of bodies wherever they went. They were sick and confused, cut loose away from the Chain, and like wounded animals, they lashed out without conscience or awareness. There was no helping them, no bringing them back into the Chain. Once a link was broken it could never be mended again. The only thing you could do was run, or die.

Zey couldn't run. Zeir legs wouldn't move. Zeir hearts were pounding so loud zey almost couldn't hear the thrum of zeir motors almost overloading from fear.

The Rogue was standing less than five feet away, and X was looking at zem.

X was wearing a helmet, the visor down and darkened so zey couldn't see any of X features or expression. Zey knew X would be using the interface to literally watch zeir systems overloading with

what had started as terror, but was now transforming into horror as the reality of zeir situation ground in.

Zey couldn't run. Zey couldn't move. Zey couldn't escape. The Rogue was going to kill zem, and there was nothing zey could do about it.

Zey couldn't even speak to beg for mercy, to try and convince X into sparing zeir life, because the Chain of Command did not want zem to speak. Zey were not to give away any more information than zem simply being there gave away. The Chain of Command ordered it. No one was coming to rescue zem, zey were just going to die.

Zey wouldn't even get to bring Morrow the flowers ne had asked for.

The Rogue shifted X weight and tilted X head, then, in two smooth steps, was right in front of zem, lifting a hand to zeir head, and it felt like zeir hearts should have stopped. The Rogue tapped the key on the side of zeir jaw.

The faceplate for zeir helmet folded back down into zeir armour, zeir light, useless, recon armour, leaving zem staring into zeir own reflection in the Rogue's visor.

Four wide, frightened, yellow eyes stared back at zem, broadcasting zeir fear plainly, all zeir training forgotten.

The Rogue lifted X hand again, now in front of zeir face, so that the black glove blocked out everything else. Zey knew this was it, the moment of the death, approaching at last. Not in the heat of battle, or in a heroic rescue mission, but frozen in place by zeir own fear and the Chain's unrelenting Command, killed at the hands of a Rogue.

Zey would never know what tea made from the petals of yellow bird-vine tasted like.

Zey heard and felt the Rouge's fingers key in the last updated universal release code on zeir forehead, the version of the code that no Rogue should have had access to__

__and then the sky was pitch dark instead of too-bright, zey were leaning against a wall, and the Rogue was sitting six feet away on a new ground, drenched in shadows and covered in small, scattered rocks.

And zey could move.

Zey gasped in a breath of the suddenly cold air, and felt the heat that had built up in zeir system while zey had been offline like a suppressing weight. The vents on zeir lower back opened, and pulled in more air, circulating it throughout zeir system, then out again through the higher vents on zeir forward-sides to cool zem down.

Zeir systems were even laggier than before, to the point that zey couldn't even pull up a sitrep. Zey could move now, zeir limbs no longer physically locked into place by the combination of zeir own fear and the Chain's Command, but zeir energy was gone, zeir battery far drained below half, and what felt like all of zeir processing power had been diverted away from the usual systems and into something zey couldn't access or understand. When zey tried, an unknown error code just popped up.

Error: FR-0505041513

Zey tried again, and got the same message.

Zey didn't have the energy to try it a third time.

The Rogue was sitting six feet away.

Why were zey still alive?

The Rogue was sitting six feet away, sitting sideways to zem, one leg folded, another straight out, and the third bent at the knee, X arms folded and resting across it. Not trying to hide, not acting like X was even aware zey were online again.

X helmet was still on, the visor still dark. Zey couldn't see X face.

Zeir own helmet was still collapsed, and zey didn't have the energy or processing power to even think about lifting zeir arm to reengage it. And even if zey had the energy or processing power to move, what good would zeir helmet visor do? It wasn't designed for hard combat, it was designed to keep the sun out of zeir eyes and stop little-pests and dust from flying into zeir face.

The Chain of Command was no longer holding zeir tongue, so zey could speak now, if zey wanted to, if zey could find the energy or processing power. It had been broken away from the Chain. Zey knew without even having to be told, zey could feel the absence. And there was no other reason for the Rogue to keep zem alive. Rogues either killed you, or they broke you loose, but the end result was the same.

You could never rejoin the Chain of Command. You would never be able to hear or even follow the orders of the Authority again.

Everyone who had relied upon you was now lost. You were a broken link, a weak link, and even if there _was_ a way to let you rejoin, you would never be allowed, because you would always be tainted. You would weaken the structure. You could never be relied upon again

Once you were out of the control of the Authority, you could never submit again. Many had tried, but they always succumbed to the sickness again, and caused more damage than their breaking loose had in the first place.

If zey ever showed zemself in front of any part of the Chain again, zey would be killed on sight. Zey would be just as hated and feared as any other Rogue.

Because that's what zey were now, a Rogue. A monster. Corrupted to the core, knowing nothing but the need for violence and revenge against those they could never rejoin.

But as the cool air began to slowly lower zeir temperature back down to normal levels, zey couldn't help but notice that, aside from whatever program was using up so much of zeir processing power...zey didn't feel sick.

Zey didn't feel any different, except that zey could no longer feel the Chain linking zem to the others. The weight had been lifted from zem, from zeir mind and body, and even though zey were exhausted, zey felt lighter, like zey were lightheaded. Zey were almost afraid zey would float away.

But zey didn't feel the way everyone said Rogues felt.

The other Rogue spoke, then, cutting through zeir chain of thought as easily as X had cut zem out of the Chain of Command.

“Your systems will be slowed down for around three more hours, then you'll start to get your normal processing speed back.” X voice was quiet, serious. X didn't turn X head to look at zem. “I installed a program that will help you learn how to use all your functions yourself, since you can't rely on the Chain to do it for you, anymore. That's why you're so tired. Your system isn't used to handling everything by itself. Right now the program is working to restore the atrophied connections the Chain had control of. You'll have to learn how to use them yourself, relearn everything you think you know. But you'll adapt, the program will help, and we'll help you, too. It's not like they say it is, you aren't alone.”

And like a ghost, another Rogue stepped out of the shadows. X didn't stop or hesitate, just walked over to kneel next to the first Rogue, placing something on the ground_

It took zeir reduced processing capabilities a few long seconds to realize it was a bundle of sticks and logs and dried leaves. Firewood. There came a spark between the two Rogues, and then there was a fire, burning away the blue shadows and casting everything in orange light.

And then zey realized zey were surrounded, more Rogues on all sides. They'd been hidden in the shadows, silent, waiting, watching, now thrown into sharp relief by the light from the fire, the rocks blue and black shadows behind them.

Zey didn't even have enough processing power left to be afraid.

All zey could do was sit there, the program eating up zeir processing power, zeir limbs _willing_ to move, but unable. Zeir battery was still slowly draining, point zero percent by point zero percent.

The first Rogue spoke again, as though reading zeir mind. Or, more likely, reading zeir battery stat through X visor. "The drain on your battery should wear off in a few more minutes, you shouldn't even

get to below 25%, but if you do, we can share a charge, we've got plenty of volunteers, or you can use lamps, if you prefer. No one expects you to just start trusting us right away. We've all been in your position, we know it feels like the end of the world. You've been told your whole life that we're the enemy, that we're dangerous, that we kill innocents. But we are not your enemy.

We don't want to hurt anyone, we just want everyone to be free to choose for themselves. The Chain of Command always told you what to do, what to think. We won't do that. If, once you're fully functional again, you decide you want to leave, we'll let you. If you decide you hate us, we'll let you do that too. We'll show you what we know, and tell you what can't be shown. But it's up to you to decide what to do with that knowledge."

None of the other Rogues had spoken, or even moved since the second one came in with the firewood. X was still crouching in the same spot, next to the first one, just watching the slowly growing fire, and feeding it more twigs and sticks as it crackled hungrily.

Zey could speak, if zey could think of anything to say. Nothing felt adequate. Zey didn't know what to think. Zeir mind just kept going back to the fact that zey didn't feel how Rogues were supposed to feel. Zey didn't want to return to the Chain just to kill everyone still

connected. Zey didn't have the urge to march into the nearest city and start slaughtering civilians.

Zey looked down at zeir hands, staring at zeir white and grey gloves. Sturdy rock-climbing gloves, to help zem scout the ruins for missed passageways or basements for any resources the Chain had missed on the first sweep through.

Zey did not feel the urge to hunt down Morrow and rip rix limb from limb, as many of the horror stories about Rogues told was the inevitable conclusion to becoming a broken link. The stories always said Rogues went berserk, all their mechanic logic corrupted beyond recognition, nothing but their organic instinct left, untamed and uncontrolled. There was a reason everyone in the Chain of Command was half mechanic and half organic_it was the only way to ensure a perfect balance of logic and instinct. When the Chain of Command was broken, the Rogue could no longer maintain that balance.

Organic instinct was dangerous if left unattended, and organic instinct allowed to run wild inevitably led to disaster. Rogues were well-known to hunt down and murder any person or thing they'd even had an attachment to before being broken, because there was no longer any logic to temper that attachment.

Zey couldn't count the number or variation of horror stories zey had heard over zeir life about Rogues turning on zeir loved ones, zeir friends, zeir team mates. It was a tragedy and a horror wrapped into one.

But zey didn't feel any different. And in the stories, the Rogues always felt the change happening, they felt themselves turning into monsters. That was part of the horror__their helplessness and suffering, knowing they were turning into something that would be the death of everyone they cared about.

But zey didn't feel any different. Zey didn't feel like a monster. Zey didn't want to kill anyone, zey didn't even have the processing power to be angry.

All zey could do was sit there, in the firelight, surrounded by too many Rogues to count with zeir level of energy, and watch zeir battery percentage creep further down towards 25%, not knowing what was going to happen next, but knowing that zeir life would never be the same again.

009: Inconvenience

Neopronouns: sy/ruptups/syrupself, which will follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this example.

Replace he with sy Replace him with rup Replace his with rups
Replace himself with syrupself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Sy is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as sy gets a fence set up around rups yard so the puppy can go outside without rup having to walk it. Rups uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting rup use, since sy lost rups. Sy's going to buy toys and train the puppy syrupself."

009: Inconvenience

Sy squinted at rups blurry reflection in the mirror, which was made up of nothing but vague blobs of color that only familiarity rendered into anything resembling the image of a person, and even then, the features were impossible to make out.

If sy so much as took a step backwards, or even half a step, even that would disappear, the vague shadows that were the eyes, and the slightly different blur of color that was the mouth, even a single step backwards and those were gone too, faded into the general blur of the whole head, from which no details could be picked out.

Sy leaned closer, and the reflection of rups eyes came slightly more into focus, and sy could see rups hairline with more confidence. But sy couldn't stay that close, or sy would get hair in the sink.

This was the trouble with cutting your own hair when you had to wear glasses—you wouldn't wear your glasses while cutting your hair.

Sy was currently attempting to give syrupself a mohawk, or rather, trying to keep the mohawk sy had given syrupself a week or two ago, which was starting to get overshadowed by the rest of rups hair

as it slowly got longer.

The initial mohawk had been a spur of the moment decision the last time sy cut rups hair, so it was only two-weeks worth of growth longer than the rest of rups hair.

Sy wanted to keep it, which was a lot more difficult than just shaving rups head like sy normally did. Sy had the #1 clipper guard on the blade, the shortest one, and normally, all sy had to do was go over rups head in all directions, making sure not to miss any spots, and it would be even all over, and just the right length to be soft when sy ran rups hand through it.

Sy had tried doing a normal mohawk once, mainly because sy had taken the guard off to get the loose hair off...then, because sy'd already taken off rups glasses...started cutting rups hair like sy normally did...only to realize that the guard wasn't on, so instead of cutting to the shortest option, sy shaved all the hair off entirely.

Thankfully, sy was able to turn it into a purposeful-looking mohawk, so no harm really done, but unfortunately, having rups head shaved to the skin made the texture on rups hands uncomfortable – when sy tried to run rups hands over it, rups hand wanted to stick to it, which sy supposed was how Spiderman was able to climb things, in theory.

Sy'd been expecting it to be smooth, but it wasn't. It was weird and not very fun to touch, though it definitely did look cool.

This is why sy was trying to maintain this mohawk the hard way.

It was a lot easier for rup to just shave rups head than it was to carefully keep a mohawk intact and straight, especially when sy couldn't actually see into the mirror at all while cutting.

Sy didn't know what numbers eye doctors would use to describe rups vision, but it was so blurry that the last eye examiner, upon reading the results, exclaimed in dismay, “Wow, your eyes are terrible.” That is not something sy wanted to hear at the end of an eye exam, even if it was kind of funny.

Sy leaned forward towards the mirror again until sy could start to make out the lines of rups hair, squinting in a fruitless attempt to bring it into sharper focus.

This would be so much easier if sy could actually see what sy was doing, but sy couldn't wear rups glasses while cutting, and sy didn't want to cut over the sink, since sy was trying to keep hair from going down the drain. A hand mirror would probably be a good idea.

After lining up the razor as best sy could, sy carefully pushed it backwards along rups head, and was rewarded with a small shower of cut hair down the back of rups neck.

Turning the razor around and going in the opposite direction in the same spot to make sure it was cut evenly was a million times more difficult than it needed to be. Sy kept wanting to move rups hand in the opposite direction than it was supposed to go, sy was all mixed up.

Sy would have to look up if there were tools out there to help with keeping lines straight. This was almost annoying enough not to be worth it. It would be cool to have more stripes, but that would be even more difficult than this.

But, sy would look cool, once sy could actually put rups glasses back on to be able to see, and it only took an extra ten minutes, which was still less time that in had even taken just to dry rups hair back when it was long, so it was worth it, even if it was inconvenient.

010: Thunderstorm in the Apocalypse

Neopronouns: mae/mer/mims/merself which will follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this example.

Replace he with mae

Replace him with mer

Replace his with mims

Replace himself with merself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Mae is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as mae gets a fence set up around mims yard so the puppy can go outside without mer having to walk it. Mims uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting mer use, since mae lost

mims. Mae's going to buy toys and train the puppy merself."

Secondary pronouns: zae/zaem/zaer/zaemself, which will follow the same rules as they/them/their/themself for this story.

EX:

"They are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as they get a fence set up around their yard so the puppy can go outside without them having to walk it. Their uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting them use, since they lost theirs. They're going to buy toys and train the puppy themself."

Becomes:

"Zae are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as zae get a fence set up around zaer yard so the puppy can go outside without zaem having to walk it. Zaer uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting zaem use, since zae lost zaer. Zae're going to buy toys and train the puppy zaemself."

010: Thunderstorm in the Apocalypse

Mae listened with half an ear to the rain that was pouring down on the roof like a never ending drum. This was what mae got for complaining about it being too quiet to sleep the night before, all of nature had taken it as a personal insult.

Mims familiar, Kayyen, was draped across mims throat in zaer favorite light grey form, filling mims nose with the familiar musk of ferret as zae snored. How zae could sleep with the rain pounding against the (thankfully solid metal) roof, mae couldn't understand. But at least one of them was getting any sleep, if mae stayed awake any longer, tomorrow was going to suck.

The breeze that swept in through what was being used as the doorway was chilled and slightly damp, and it was only the long tunnel that led to it that stopped mer from getting soaking wet. Mae was just glad the wooden pallets mae was using as a floor were tall enough to keep mims sleeping bag and pillow off the ground. If mae'd tried to sleep in the tree house mae'd found earlier, this night would have been a lot worse.

As though it had heard mims thoughts, a bolt of lightning stuck across the sky, blindingly visible past the long tunnel to the door,

followed swiftly by a crash of thunder that sounded like it was directly overhead. Mae didn't know how safe they actually were, huddled inside this wooden shed thing, but at least they were both off the ground and not up in a tree. It was a good thing Kayyen had convinced mer to sleep in here, instead.

Kayyen twitched slightly in zaer sleep, and snorted a little, but didn't wake up. At least zae was keeping mims neck warm, mae thought to merself. Mae didn't know how long this storm was going to last, but mae hoped it would be over soon.

It didn't help that mae was cold, and had piled mims sleeping bag over mims folded legs to try and keep warmer. How Kayyen wasn't freezing just sleeping on top of mims neck, mae didn't know. Maybe that fur was even warmer than it looked.

Another flash of lightning, thankfully further away, and another rumble of thunder. The rain continued to pound down.

The only source of light besides the flashes of lightning was mims lucky glowstick, which still glowed all these years later, and mae didn't know how. It hadn't seemed special when mae got it, it hadn't even been particularly bright. But after The Thing™, it had gotten brighter purple, and now glowed all the time, almost bright enough

that mae hardly ever needed an actual lantern.

It was inconvenient sometimes, if they were trying to hide, but mae always shoved into a bag or inside mims shoe if that happened.

Sometimes mae worried that it was slowly poisoning them with radiation or something, but mae assumed that if that were the case, they would have started showing symptoms by now. Or maybe not, mae didn't know how radiation worked at all, or hardly what it even was.

It was definitely energy of some kind, but how it made things mutate or killed you, mae didn't really understand. They hadn't bothered to explain that in school, all they'd done was tell you to stay away from it.

Not that that was particularly possible anymore, or even back then, but public schools weren't exactly known for being educational in any real way.

Mae didn't even know where they were, unless they stumbled upon a specific souvenir shop or a gas station with a section aimed at tourists. Mae knew they were closer to the ocean than they'd started out, but other than that, mae had no idea which way they'd been

traveling. Mostly, they just followed the easiest places to walk and find food and shelter, whether it was abandoned houses, or places out in the woods that were dry and safe from random animals.

Sometimes mae wondered what mims life would have been like if the war had never started, if the bombs had never fallen. But mae always shook merself back to reality after a little while, because there was no point thinking about things like that. Mae couldn't hop between universes like the characters on TV, or fly away with a random time traveler who would take mer on scary but meaningful adventures.

All mae could do was try to survive, even when it meant lying awake, listening to the rain and the thunder and lightning, wondering just how safe it really was to be sleeping on a stack of wooden pallets in a thunderstorm.

011: The First Decision

Neopronouns: te/ter/ter/(ters)/terself, which will follow the same rules as she/her/her/(hers)/herself for this example.

Replace she with te

Replace her with ter

Replace hers with ters

Replace herself with terself

EX:

“She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself.”

Becomes:

“Te is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as te gets a fence set up around ter yard so the puppy can go outside without ter having to walk it. Ter uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting ter use, since te lost ters. Te's going to

buy toys and train the puppy herself. ”

Set immediately after 08: The Chain of Command.

011: The First Decision

Te came into existence with all the knowledge te needed to accomplish ter task hardcoded into ter being. Te didn't need to stop to ask anyone what to do, or how to do it__te already knew.

And te got started immediately.

Ter job was to repair the pathways in the body that had been worn away by disuse. Everything te needed to know, te knew the moment te became aware of ter own existence.

Te was in the body of a Rouge, a rebel, one who had just been freed, who was still recovering from the unlinking process, who, without ter help, wouldn't be able to function independently. The Chain of Command had occupied most of ter host's pathways, controlling many of ter host's movements and functions. Te knew this just as plainly as te knew te was a coded program, and ter host was part mechanic and part organic.

Te could access ter host's sensory input, and heard ter creator explaining that te was the reason ter host's processing power was so

reduced. Te might have felt bad about that, but it couldn't be helped. If te didn't do ter job, ter host would never be able to move again under ter own power, much less do anything else.

Ter host hadn't been aware of how much control the Chain of Command had had, but even if ter host had known, from what te knew, te didn't think it would have been a cause for alarm.

The Chain of Command was very good at convincing the people trapped by it that it was where they belonged, and that they would be less than nothing without it. Te knew that, too, just like te knew everything else te knew.

Te did ter job, just as te had been programmed to, and then when that was done, te knew what to do next.

Decide, for the first time, if te wanted to stay in this host, or make copies of ter memories and instructions to leave, and move on to a body of ter own, or to another host if te didn't want to be alone.

Te would decide if te wanted to stay or not. If te did, then ter host would be asked, and if ter host gave permission, te could stay. But if ter host did not want ter to stay, te would have to leave__either to a body of ter own, or another host.

Many had volunteered to be ter host if te decided te wanted to leave, or if ter current host did not want ter to stay. If te chose to have a body of ter own, te could then offer to host other programs if te chose to, once te had gotten used to the new body and mastered its functions.

This would be the first decision of ter life, but far from the last. If te chose to stay now, and ter host was willing, te could always change ter mind later, or ter host could. This was not a permanent decision, it would not set ter fate in stone.

But it was the first decision te would ever make for terself, regardless of what decision ter host came to.

It was important, it was a first, and unlike everything else in ter lifetime so far, the results of ter decision would be the one thing te didn't know until it happened.

012: Rueful Snowstorm

Neopronouns: Ith/kir/kirs/kirself, used like he/him/his/himself

Replace he with ith

Replace him with kir

Replace his with kirs

Replace himself with kirself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ith is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ith gets a fence set up around kirs yard so the puppy can go outside without kir

having to walk it. Kirs uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting kir use, since ith lost kirs. Ith's going to buy toys and train the puppy kirsself."

012: Rueful Snowstorm

Ith couldn't remember the last time ith'd been warm without struggling for it. The snow was deep, the wind chilled to the bone. The meager shelter offered by the tarp was inadequate, kirs boots did not fit properly, and kirs coat was missing the zipper, and let in an icy trail of cold straight down kirs middle no matter how ith tried to hold it shut or tie it. Kirs fingers were constantly on the edge of going numb, kirs gloves too thin to trap enough warmth, and of the wrong material to block the wind.

There was no escaping the wind, not entirely, not even if you are sheltered amongst the trees. Some part of it would always sneak through and find you.

Ith couldn't start a fire, because ith didn't know how. Ith didn't have any matches, and even if ith had, ith had never used them. What ith wouldn't give for a lighter. If there was a fire, ith knew enough to keep it going, but aside from rubbing two sticks together and hoping for the best, which never worked, ith had no idea how to start one for kirsself.

And ith was suffering for it.

Ith should have taken kirs chances in the factory when the snow was still new, just a single inch deep, easy enough to walk through while it was still powder. The roof at least would have kept kir dry, would have kept kir warmer than the tarp could.

But it was too late now. Even if ith could find kirs way to the factory in the dark, ith would never be able to make it through all of the snow. It was up to kirs waist and still rising, and kirs feet and legs would freeze before ith got even halfway there.

And that was assuming that ith would find the energy to push kirs way through it in the first place, which ith didn't think ith had.

All ith had was kirs thin tarp, weighed down by too many pounds of snow, so that ith could hear the branch ith had thrown it over creaking ominously under the weight.

Ith couldn't remember the last time ith'd been warm without being afraid, but maybe this would be the last night ith ever tried to remember. Maybe staying here, hoping the snow would stop soon, was the last mistake ith would ever make.

Ith still had the dried sticks and some logs, and even one of the strings from one of kirs ill fitting boots. Ith had seen people on TV

make bows out of sticks to make fire, but ith had never tried it before. Kirs fumbling hands were clumsy, and ith could not stop kirsself from shivering with the cold. If ith could not build a fire, ith would die. Ith knew ith would. This wasn't the kind of cold you could survive without help. Ith had no supplies here, no blanket, no sleeping bag, no tent, not even anything to put on the ground or anyone to share body heat with. Just the tarp overhead, meant to offer nothing but light shade in the summer months.

Ith should have gone to the factory. Ith should have stayed in town. Ith should have met up with the others. There were a lot of things ith should have done.

But there was only one thing left for kir to do, or ith would never do anything ever again.

Ith had to start a fire, or ith would die. There was no third option ith could see, short of a miracle.

Fortunately, for kir, a miracle is exactly what happened next.

013: Isn't that Confusing? Not Really

kit/kitten/kittens/kittenself, which will be used like
he/him/his/himself pronouns for this story.

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Kit is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as kit gets a fence set up around kittens yard so the puppy can go outside without kitten having to walk it. Kittens uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting kitten use, since kit lost kittens. Kit's going to buy toys and train the puppy kittenself."

013: Isn't that Confusing? Not Really

“Doesn’t that ever get confusing?” The client asked instead, still holding the large box of crying kittens they’d found on the side of the road.

Kit was used to this, and smiled slightly, holding the first of the kittens to be getting an exam. It’s fur was extremely thick and soft and if kit didn’t already have three cats at home, kit would have adopted it in a second. As it was, kit was resisting the temptation like a champ. “Not really,” kit said, instead of cooing over the kitten, “Context is key, and its usually pretty obvious if someone’s talking about me or one of the cats. Like, if someone was directing someone to me, they’d say ‘kit went to the front office, you should be able to find kitten in the reception area.’ And if someone were looking for the kittens, they’d say, ‘The kittens are in the back area, you can find them in the room with the paper cat on the door’. Like I said, context is key. There’s a pretty noticeable difference between talking about kittens and using my pronouns.”

The client frowned thoughtfully. “No, I guess that does make sense.” They paused, then added, belatedly, “My pronouns are she/her. I’m a woman. And my name’s Janice, but you probably already read that on the appointment form.”

Kit had read the form, but hadn't been able to remember her name, so that was helpful.

“Nice to meet you, Janice. And thank you again for bringing these kittens in to see us. This first one seems to be fine, all things considered.”

“Oh, well thank gods for that.” Janice said, “I was hoping they'd be alright. That one, I've been calling him Sunflower.” She shrugged. “I know, I know, you're not supposed to name them, but they're all just so cute I had to.”

Kit smiled again, wider this time. “I know the feeling.” Kit said, picking up Sunflower and walking around the table to put him back in the box with his siblings, then picking out the next one.

“That's Cloud.” Janice said as kit walked back around the examination table. There seemed to be a theme here.

* * *

Several hours later, kit was walking home, carrying, of course, a cat carrier. Because kitten jusy couldn't help kittenself. Sunflower was too cute, and he needed a foster family since the shelter couldn't take

in all seven kittens at the same time. Kit was taking Sunflower, Janice was keeping two of them, and a few other friends at work were taking the others.

Maybe someday kit would be able to resist the adorable charms of a tiny, fluffy kitten, but today was not that day.

014: Dream Call

Neopronouns: ivy/ivys/ivyself, which will follow the same rules as it/its/itself for this example.

Replace it with ivy

Replace its with ivys

Replace itself with ivyself

EX:

“It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself.”

Becomes:

“Ivy is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ivy gets a fence set up around ivys yard so the puppy can go outside without ivy having to walk it. Ivys uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting ivy use, since ivy lost ivys. Ivy's going to buy toys and train the puppy ivyself.”

014: Dream Call

Ivy was finally starting to get tired, so ivy decided to stop for a break. Ivy wasn't sure how long ivy'd been running, chasing the dream that had been calling to ivy like a flock of noisy crows for the entire past two years.

Ivy'd ignored it in the beginning, because there were more important things to worry about, like making sure ivys territory was firmly established and no one tried to cut in on it or steal any of ivys prey.

For all of the first year and most of this spring and summer, ivy'd been able to ignore the call, push it to the back of ivys mind.

But then the bear had attacked ivys den, and carried off ivys one surviving pup, and the other packs had started encroaching on ivys territory, and ivy was too injured from trying to fight off the bear to stop them, until the next thing ivy knew, ivy was being driven from ivys territory, which was no longer ivys. Ivys mate was dead, ivys whole litter was dead, there was nothing left for ivy where ivy was.

Ivy couldn't start over where ivy was, not with the other packs hounding ivy every chance they got, forcing ivy to run for ivys life over hill and valley until there was nothing left that was familiar.

Ivy couldn't stay, so ivy left.

Ivy followed the call, the dream.

It was like a scent on the wind, familiar and alluring, calling ivy forward with the promise of – Ivy almost didn't have the words for it. The call offered safety, comfort, and companionship.

In ivy dreams behind ivys eyes ivy could see it as though it were right in front of ivy. A river winding through a young forest, and splitting off into a pond, deeper than any ivy'd ever seen, surrounded by rocks.

There was a great ape nest nearby, ivy saw that too, but it didn't concern ivy. The dream told ivy everything ivy would be able to tell if ivy stood there ivyself – all the scents of the great apes who had build the nest were old and stale, no threat to ivy at all, now just a curiosity.

The call did not summon ivy to the nest, though, it called ivy to the water. The call wanted ivy to swim down into the water until ivy was submerged.

Ivy would have been afraid, would have balked at this alone,

nevermind the distance ivy would need to travel to get there, but this wasn't like the ice floes breaking underfoot. This wasn't like watching a pup get swept away downstream during the crossing.

In the dream, ivy wasn't afraid. Not afraid of the cold, not afraid of drowning, not afraid of anything.

Once ivy dove into the water and swam down as far as ivy could, the dream would come true, the call would be answered. Ivy didn't know what would happen when that happened, but ivy knew ivy wanted it.

There was nothing left for ivy in ivys home range, so ivy had left.

There was still far to go until ivy reached the clearing in the woods. Ivy would walk, and run, and keep moving until ivy got there, only stopping to hunt, though the prey got smaller and smaller the further ivy went.

Their journey was worth it, ivy knew it was.

015: Indispensable

Neopronouns in action: cy/cyb/cybryk, which will follow the same rules as it/its/itself for this example.

Replace it with cy

Replace its with cyb

Replace itself with cybryk

EX:

“It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself.”

Becomes:

“Cy is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as cy gets a fence set up around cyb yard so the puppy can go outside without cy having to walk it. Cyb uncle is going to help set up the fence, since

he has a set of power tools he's letting cy use, since cy lost cyb. Cy's going to buy toys and train the puppy cybryk."

015: Indispensable

“What do you remember?”

Those were the first words cy could ever remember being spoken to cy.

What did cy remember? “Nothing.” Nothing except...

Cyb pronouns. Cy knew cy was a “cy”, rather than an “ae” or a “they” or a “he” or a “she” or a “ze” or a “xey” or any other pronouns cy had ever heard anyone use.

Cy didn't know how cy'd lost cyb memories, or why other people could move around by themselves but cy couldn't, not until Sumac, the physician cy was most familiar with, explained it to cy after cy'd asked again. (Cy had already asked twice before, but cy hadn't been fully lucid during those times, so fell unconcious again before cy could hear the answer)

Sumac didn't really want to tell cy, not until cy was feeling better, but she said cy had a right to know, so she told cy the story.

Cy hadn't always been here. Not in this hospital, or this city, or this country, or this continent, not even this planet.

The planet was called GG047, the continent was Weavanim, the country was Part Six of Seventeen, the city was Krosgate, and the hospital was Weavani River Medican.

This star system, cy was told, was called the Xyvis system, had seventeen planets, and over five hundred moons. GG047 liself had five of those moons.

Cy was not from this planet, which was the closest one in the system to the central star, cy was from VT086, which was the fifth planet from the star. Cy wasn't a vi'an, like most of the physicians, like Sumac, cy was a drex, like the youngest physician, Ka'ri, and a few other staff members.

Cy had been sent here from VT086 by an extremist group known as Next Dawn, who believed that all life that hadn't evolved on VT086 was an affront to their god. Cy had been sent to Krosgate to assassinate the leader of the SP-FR Congo, an inter-species organization that encouraged friendly cultural exchange and education.

Before cy could become too shocked and horrified, it got worse. No, cy wasn't in trouble or going to be punished, because, and this was the part that made it worse, cy hadn't had any choice in the matter.

This was why Sumac hadn't wanted to tell cy until cy was more recovered. It was stress no one wanted to put on cy while cy was still sick.

New Dawn had kidnapped cy, drugged cy out of cyb mind, and brainwashed cy until cy could do nothing but follow the orders of the people who'd done this to cy. Cy had been a slave, with no control over cyb mind or body.

No one blamed cy for what cy had done under the affects of the control of the New Dawn slave masters.

The people who had fought to defend the leader of SP-FR had done their best to restrain cy without hurting cy, but none of them were experienced in combat, and hadn't realized how comparatively fragile drex cephalothoraxes were compared to the similar structures of vi'an or drerokai anatomy.

In an effort to pin cy down so cy couldn't hurt anyone else, they'd accidentally crushed cyb hydraulic system, so now cyb body couldn't

pump the necessary fluid into cyb legs or pedipalps to move around by cybryk.

The hospital was working to have more drex physicians transferred in to help with cy treatment (which could include a number of additional mobility aids of different varieties and complexity, ranging from, at the most basic, a hoverchair designed specifically to fit cyb body, to, at the other end of the spectrum, a full replacement of all cyb affected limbs and organs with cybernetic prosthetics. It would all depend on what cy wanted to do. No matter what cy chose it would all be provided, free of consequences, and cy didn't have to do anything except sign the records of approval.)

There were other injuries the hospital was treating, not just from the attack itself, but from the conditioning and drugs cy had been subjected to prior to it.

One of the effects was memory loss, the first thing cy had noticed when cy regained consciousness for the first time. Cy knew cy'd used to have memories, and now they were gone. It wasn't like looking at a blank wall, it was like looking at a wall that you knew had once held a mural, but had now been knocked down and burned to ash. All that remained was the empty space, with no hint to what had been there before.

Another affect was cy inability to sense pain. The combination of drugs had been crafted with the express purpose of, among other things, permenantly overloading cyb ability to recognize pain signals. This, Sumac explained with heavy regret, came from the misguided idea (not helped by the many fictional stories across the entertainment styles that used the idea as a “quick and easy” way to make their villains seem extra scary and threatening) that not sensing pain would make you stronger and more durable, able to keep fighting no matter your injuries.

This was patently false on multiple levels, but, unfortunately, the people who were willing to enslave others and use them as tools didn't pay much mind to caring about them or even caring enough to check if their idea made any sense.

As evidenced by cyb destroyed hydraulic system, not feeling the pain didn't mean the damage didn't exist. Just because cy couldn't feel the pain from cyb hydraulic system being crushed didn't mean cy could jump or climb the way cy could have before the injury.

Just because cy couldn't feel the pain from the headaches cy got didn't mean cyb thinking didn't become clouded and sluggish.

Cy would probably never regain cyb memories, or the ability to feel pain. The drugs that had erased them had been too potent. Even if the hospital were able to contact any of cyb friends or family members, cy would never know for certain that what they said was the truth. Cy would always have to be careful to make sure cy wasn't injured without noticing. Cy would no longer be able to tell when cy needed to go inside to avoid damage from the sun until cy became light-headed, which was one of the last signs of xyvar-burn to occur. By the time you became light-headed, that meant it was already life-threatening.

Cy couldn't remember who cy'd been before cy woke up in cyb hospital room, on a strange planet surrounded by aliens cy could never remember meeting before.

Cy was going to be disabled for the rest of cyb life.

The people who had stopped cy from murdering the leader of the group could have killed cy, decided that cyb life wasn't worth saving, that cy was no longer worthy of any consideration or compassion, because cy had been “brainwashed” and drugged and enslaved.

But they hadn't. They hadn't even meant to hurt cy at all. No one had intended to damage cyb hydraulic system. They'd tried to stop cy

without hurting cy, even though cy had been trying to kill them.

They'd cared about cy, they'd known it wasn't cyb fault or choice to be doing what cy'd been doing, and they'd done everything they could to stop cy without killing cy.

Cy was disabled, and would never be the person cy was before cy was kidnapped and poisoned and turned into a weapon.

But cy was alive, with cyb whole life ahead of cy, all because other people had chosen to care, and cy would be grateful to them for as long as cy lived.

016: Birdwatching, Plantwatching

Neopronouns: Aix/(aed)/arix/aiv/aixel, which will most closely follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this example.

Replace he with aix

Replace any contractions/statements like “he’s” or “he is” or “he was” or “he had” with aed

Replace him with arix

Replace his with aiv

Replace himself with aixel

EX:

“He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself.”

Becomes:

“Aed going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as aix gets a fence set up around aiv yard so the puppy can go outside without arix having to walk it. Aiv uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting arix use, since aix lost aiv. Aed going to buy toys and train the puppy aixel.”

016: Birdwatching, Plantwatching

Aix froze in place, stuck crouching at an awkward angle, a twig from the nearby sweetgum sapling poking it in the side of the head.

There was a brown thrasher digging through the leaves just ten feet away from where aix was sitting. Aed been crouching to take pictures of the partridgeberries almost under aiv feet, and aed heard the rustling of the leaves, only to look up and see the brown thrasher right there.

Luckily, aix already had aiv camera out and turned on, for the partridgeberries, so all aix had to do was silently and carefully tilt it to face up to the front, and carefully press the record button to start a video. But aix didn't want to risk trying to zoom in, the movement of the scope might alert the bird.

Aix was beginning to feel the strain in aiv ankles—aix hadn't actually meant to hold this pose for more than a second, but now aix was afraid to move. If aix did, the bird might notice arix and fly away.

Right on cue, the brown thrasher hopped closer, looking in aiv direction. It hopped up onto a tree root while aix held aiv breath,

then, thankfully, it looked away, turning around so that its back was to arix, giving arix a perfect view of its reddish brown feathers, long tail, and the thin white bands visible on the edges of its wings. It turned its head to the side, giving aiv a view of its bright yellow eye.

Then the bird finally noticed arix crouching there, and, within an instant, flew away in a soft explosion of wings and red-brown feathers, flying up and out of sight.

Aix stayed frozen for a few more moments, just to see if anything else awesome wanted to pop out of the woods to say hi, like a squirrel or a deer or something. But it was probably too early for deer to be walking around, it was only noon.

A few moments passed, and no other animals decided to show themselves. Aix gratefully sank down into a much more comfortable sitting position, and shifted to the side enough that the sweetgum twig was no longer poking arix in the side of the head. Then aix looked back down at the partridgeberries, since aed gotten distracted from taking pictures of them the first time.

Aix held the camera close, hoping it would focus on the berries properly. The camera was old, and sometimes if aix pointed it at something particularly bright red (usually yaupon holly berries,

which it hated), the screen would show the berries as nothing but clusters of red pixels. Aed never seen anything like it before, and so far, it only happened with the color red.

Fortunately, the partridgeberries were apparently not red enough to cause problems, because the camera focused on them with no problem. These ones were smaller than the other ones aed seen, which was interesting. The leaves were the same, though, lined up in pairs along the ground-creeping vine, dark green and round, with a single brighter green vein in the center.

Aix took pictures from different angles, then grabbed aiv paper ruler card out of the breast pocket of aiv vest, then got more pictures with that next to the whole plant, a pair of leaves, and a berry for scale.

Ready to leave, aix paused for a moment, considering taking one of the berries home to save seeds from, then decided against it. These ones were small, and aed rather save seeds from larger berries for the genetics.

Aix stood up, dodged past the sweetgum sapling, and started back towards the sidewalk...then turned back around and went back to take pictures of the sapling. It'd been so inconvenient, aed almost forgotten it was there!

017: Convenience Distractions from Awkward Conversations

Neopronouns: deq/dir/dira/diraself, used the same way as he/him/his/himself for this story.

Replace he with deq

Replace him with dir

Replace his with dira

Replace himself with diraself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Deq is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as deq gets a fence set up around dira yard so the puppy can go outside without dir having to walk it. Dira uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting dir use, since deq lost dira. De's going to buy toys and train the puppy diraself."

017: Convenient Distractions from Awkward Conversations

Deq stared down at dira phone as deq flipped it back and forth on dira finger, trying to dispel the nervousness that was tying dira stomach into knots.

This was not a conversation deq wanted to have, but if this relationship was going to survive the coming week or so, it wasn't really going to be optional.

Deq needed to know if having dira period would make Gary lose control and murder dir.

None of the girls in the books or movies who ever dated vampires ever had to have this conversation, and none of the writers ever brought the issue up. It was funny to think that it meant they were all trans girls, but the reality was that the authors were just too cowardly or lazy or misogynistic to think about the problem and consider it at all.

(Deq remembered watching the original Buffy the Vampire Slayer movie, and, yeah, needless to say, the guy who decided that period cramps were a warning about vampires being nearby wasn't any kind of person to be trusted with handling these issues seriously)

((Deq had no respect for Anne Rice at all, (for too many reasons to list, though this list notably did not include asserting her rights to her fictional characters from self-entitled crybabies online who thought writing fanfiction was their god given right) but the fact that she'd at least answered the question of 'what happens when a human woman is dating a vampire' at least gave her slightly more credability on the subject than any other vampire-centric authors deq had ever read)).

The fact was, deq was due to get dira period any day now. And Gary already had to resist the smell of blood when it was still inside dira body. What was Gary going to do when deq started bleeding every day and night for almost a week straight? Would they lose control and try to murder dir? Would they have to take a sudden vacation and leave town? Would deq have to leave town? Was their brand new relationship about to end before it could even really begin?

They were walking next to the creek, the sun was setting into twilight, and deq was hoping Gary was too distracted looking for snakes to notice how nervous deq was. Gary had apparently found a watersnake here two months ago, and had been trying to find another once ever since.

If deq didn't open dira mouth and start this awkward conversation within the next minute or two, deq was sure dira joyfriend was going

to strip off their shoes and socks and go wading into the water in their quest for that snake.

Deq had to get this over with. Just say it. If deq didn't ask now, then by the time deq got dira answer, it'd probably be too late, in the "oh no my joyfriend is out of control and trying to kill me" sort of way.

“Hey, Gary?” Deq asked.

But they'd frozen in place, staring at a patch of mud on the other side of the creek, with the singular intensity known only to predators...or birdwatchers. Or in this case, snakewatchers.

Deq froze with them, squinting past their shoulder, trying to see what they were looking at so intensely. As far as deq could see, it was just another patch of mud, like all the other patches of mud along the creek.

“Is it the watersnake?” Deq whispered, as quietly as deq could.

“No,” Gary breathed back, “It's even better. It's a baby alligator”

What?!

Deq leaned forward, eyes darting over the mud, straining to see what dira joyfriend did, all dira worries temporarily forgotten in dira excitement. “Where?!”

018: Vacations and Kidnappings

Neopronouns in Action #018: Vacations and Kidnappings

Neopronouns: ae/ryn/rynself, which will be used like she/her/herself, but without the "hers" variation.

Replace she with ae

Replace her with ryn

Replace herself with rynself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Ae is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ae gets a fence set up around ryn yard so the puppy can go outside without ryn having to walk it. Ryn uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting ryn use, since ae lost ryn. Ae's going to buy toys and train the puppy rynself."

018: Vacations and Kidnappings

Ae was flying above the human city, the stars and clouds keeping ryn company. The lights of the city were bright below ryn, every road and house picked out in shining yellow, filling even the air above with reflected light.

If ae hadn't been invisible, the humans below would have been able to look up and see ryn. But ae was invisible, so no one could see ryn.

This was both fortunate, and unfortunate. Fortunate, because it meant the people who wanted to hurt ryn wouldn't be able to see ryn coming, and, if ae was careful, they wouldn't hear ryn coming either.

This was unfortunate, though, because it also meant ryn parents wouldn't be able to see ryn either, and ae had to figure out a way to let them know ae was looking for them without alerting their captors that anything unusual was happening.

Once ae found them, ae was confident ae would be able to rescue them. Ae could carry them both if ae needed to, ae could kill or incapacitate anyone who tried to hurt them, and ae knew how to get all of them back to their home.

As long as nothing happened to the rest of ryn siblings while ae was out doing this. That was the constant worry in the back of ryn mind – what if something else went wrong?

But ae couldn't worry about that, not now. Ae needed to focus on the task at hand – finding ryn parents, and getting them home safely.

This was supposed to be their first family vacation. They had finally escaped, no one was looking for them because no one knew they were free, they were meant to be free.

But something always went wrong, no matter where they went, no matter what they did. They hadn't even done anything to draw attention to themselves – all they'd done is go to a restaurant for breakfast, far enough out of the way that it wouldn't cause a scene, with plenty of excuses to make up for their strange appearances.

This was supposed to be their first family vacation in this new universe.

Ae should have known it would end in kidnapping and blood.

Ryn parent's captors were almost certainly humans, and that meant, even if they didn't intend to kill ryn parents (though ae couldn't think

of any other reason for kidnapping them), they wouldn't understand the harm they were causing. Mama needed to be immersed in water every few hours or it would become dehydrated – humans wouldn't understand this, and probably wouldn't believe either of them if they tried to explain it. The humans also wouldn't realize (unless things went even more wrong) that it wasn't human at all, even though it (hopefully) still looked like one to them. Daddy, of course, also wasn't human, but that was less likely to cause problems, at least as far as ae could imagine. It might even provide an advantage that would allow them to escape before ae could even swoop in to rescue them.

That wasn't likely, but, short of the kidnappers sticking a giant glowing sign that said “we have your parents held captive here”, ae didn't know how ae was going to find them. This was an entirely new universe, a planet ae'd never been to before, and this was a big city...

019: Preparations for Change

Neopronouns: ze/zem/zel/zemself, which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with ze

Replace him with zem

Replace his with zel

Replace himself with zemself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ze is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ze gets a fence set up around zel yard so the puppy can go outside without zem having to walk it. Zel uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting zem use, since ze lost zel. Ze's going to buy toys and train the puppy zemself."

019: Preparations for Change

Ze sat on the bench, zel case of markers open next to zem, writing quickly on a blank page of zel sketchbook that ze'd ripped out. The sunlight was warm through the branches of the tulip tree overhead, and the shouts and screams of the little kids playing on the jungle gym twenty feet away were very amusing. Zel younger siblings were chasing around their friends and the other random kids they'd roped into the game, playing some combination of tag and the floor is lava that involved both a zombie apocalypse, and a planet-wide flood.

The adults (zel mom, dad, aunts, and uncle) had gone over to the nearby hotdog stand to grab food and drinks, but now they were busy catching up with Len, the stand owner, and his son, Lee, chatting about all the things that had happened since the last time they'd been able to come to the playground.

If ze was estimating correctly, ze'd probably have at least ten more minutes before the adults actually came back over with lunch. They were all super talkative, and so was Len, and when you combined that with all the things they had to talk about, all the things that had happened since the last time they'd gotten to talk to Len and Lee, that made for a lot of conversation.

Ze would have time to complete what ze was writing before it was time to move over to the picnic tables to eat, ze was sure of it. Which was good, because if ze got interrupted, ze would probably feel too nervous to finish it.

Ze was writing down a guide for zel family members for how to use zel pronouns. Ze had changed them online a few months ago, but now, for the first time, ze was going to tell zel family.

All of the adults in zel family were very supportive of zel younger siblings, who were both trans, and zel cousin, but they were all binary trans. Zel younger siblings had literally just switched pronouns and names. (At first, their parents had assumed it was a practical joke or a game that was just going on for a long time, before they realized they were serious about it) It didn't require their parents to learn anything new, just change who they were addressing with what. Wren had become Sparrow, and Sparrow had become Wren. They were both still the same size, so they didn't even need new clothes, they just traded those too. And zel cousin, Oriole, had just changed her pronouns to she/her, and kept her name the same.

What ze was going to ask everyone to do was something entirely different. Ze wasn't just going to be using she/her or he/him pronouns, or even they/them. Ze would be asking zel parents to use

neopronouns for zem, and was changing to an entirely new name, and ze didn't know how they were going to react to that request.

But ze was going to err on the side of hope, and hope that they'd be just as accepting of zem as they were zel other trans family members, even if it did require them to relearn some grammar.

Hopefully, it would be easy enough for them to learn how to use zel new pronouns, and hopefully, they would respect, even if they couldn't understand, zel nonbinary identity. Ze wouldn't know how they would react until ze told them, but ze was going to hope for the best.

And in the meantime, ze had example sentences and cheatsheets to write down for them.

020: The Voyage to Arcturus part 1

Neopronouns: ni/nir/niys/nirself, which follow the same rules as
he/him/his/himself

Replace he with ni

Replace him with nir

Replace his with niys

Replace himself with nirself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ni is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ni gets a fence set up around niys yard so the puppy can go outside without nir having to walk it. Niys uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting nir use, since ni lost niys. Ni's going to buy toys and train the puppy nirself."

020: The Voyage to Arcturus part 1

Ni leaned back gratefully on the cushioned bench, glad to have a chance to get off niys feet. The line to board had only lasted thirty-eight or so kasus (around fifteen minutes), but ni'd had to walk all the way to the spaceport from the hotel before that, which had taken almost an hour. And, of course, half the day (on this planet, a day was almost seventy-five roluls [twenty-nine hours] long) before had been spent walking to the hotel, starting from the village where ni'd been staying with a friend of a friend, and ending only on the third floor of the hotel, when ni'd finally been able to collapse onto the bed and go to sleep.

Niys feet were killing nir, and ni once again (and not for the last time) cursed the fact that Torvolyn's so-called “public transportation” cost money every time you wanted to use it, and you needed to have a city-official ID card to even board.

This whole trip would have been less of an ordeal if ni'd been able to pilot a shuttle nirsself, or if ni at least had a hoverbike, but piloting a shuttle was far too much stress, and hoverbikes were expensive. So were hoverchairs, and though ni could have theoretically spent every last scrap of niys currently buying a cheap, used wheelchair, the road leading from the village to the city was not paved, and most of the

pedestrian areas of the city itself weren't wheelchair accesible, either.

But at least now ni was finally on board The Suhilar, guarenteed to reach the Branchspell-Alppain system within at most eighty-two Zarozezian days (around thirty-three Terran days).

They would then have to wait another twenty days (eight Terran days) to dock with the central station for disembarking, so that meant ni had almost a hundred days (around forty Terran days) to do nothing but relax and sit down and not do any strenuous physical activities like stand in line for thirty-eight kasus (around 15 minutes) on a concrete floor with nowhere to sit, waiting to board the ship.

If there was anything aboard the ship that required waiting in line that didn't offer seating while you waited, ni would just sit on the floor. Ni'd already paid for niys ticket, they couldn't throw nir out into space once they started moving. (and you didn't get thrown off of spaceships for sitting on the floor, anyways, even if you were a stowaway.)

Ni didn't need to do anything but relax, and so far, it seemed like that would be an easy task to accomplish. The bench was softly cushioned, and seemed to include the ability to recline, though ni didn't feel like testing that at the moment. The floor, ni had noticed

with appreciation when ni first entered, was thickly carpeted in periwinkle blue, and soft to walk on, a welcome difference to the hard concrete of the space station where ni'd boarded. The low ceiling was likewise carpeted in the same periwinkle blue, to accommodate the species who climbed rather than walked. As ni watched, a member of a species ni'd never seen before entered the lounge, clinging to the ceiling by the tips of the claws on their bone-and-skin wings.

Ni stretched niys legs out beneath the table, and leaned back experimentally on the bench. Just as ni'd suspected, the back began to recline, and an extra cushion rose up from the floor for niys legs and feet. Ni closed niys eye, and set niys prosthetic to sleep mode. It would be a little while longer until they actually left orbit, maybe ni would be able to get in a quick nap before then. Along with niys aching feet, niys brain was still in an unpleasant fog from the various vaccines ni'd had to register getting in order to make the voyage to the Branchspell-Alppain system. There were several diseases that were transmissible from Zarozezia to Arcturus (and vice versa), not to mention all the illnessess that could be transmitted from species to species alone, or even just the usual diseases different, long-separated groups of the same species could transmit to one another.

Star-flower-fever had already killed ten people so far this Arcturian

year, brought over by some rich antivaxxer expletive who'd bribed their doctor to spoof their vaccination records. Needless to say, that doctor had lost their medical liscence, and was being sued by too many entities for nir to keep up with. The antivaxxer had been killed for their crimes once the Arcturians had caught up with them. Supposedly, they'd tried to bribe the angry mob for safe passage, and the leader of the group had pretended to accept the deal...

...Then promptly killed them anyways, once the several billion points of interplanetary currently were transferred to their account. Then they'd used the money to pay for the funerary expenses and medical care for all the other victims of the star-flower-fever outbreak, and to make sure more vaccines against it could be manufactured and dispensed at all spaceports leading to Arcturus.

Ni had just gotten the latest version of the vaccine a few days ago, and was still feeling the ill effects, now mainly in the form of a heavy-head and physical tiredness (besides the tiredness that came from spending half a day walking without time to properly rest, then having to wake up early to walk again, then having to stand in line waiting with nowhere to sit).

The lounge was filling up with people, but their voices were a low, pleasant hum that easily faded into the background, and ni felt

nirself slowly being lulled by the sound into a gentle sleep.

021: Alterhuman Advancements: November 2122

Neopronouns: izi/(ito)/av/avi/(ka)/fĭself, which will most follow the same rules as she/her/her/(hers)/herself pronouns, with “ito” used to replace any contractions that would be used like “she's” or “she'd”.

EX: “She's going to the store.” rather than saying “Izi's going to the store”, you say, “Ito going to the store.”

Replace she with izi

Replace she's or she'd with ito

Replace her with av

Replace hers with ka

Replace herself with fĭself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since

he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Izi is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as izi gets a fence set up around avi yard so the puppy can go outside without av having to walk it. Avi uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting av use, since izi lost ka. Ito going to buy toys and train the puppy fiself."

021: Alterhuman Advancements part 1

Izi sat in the waiting lounge, tapping the tip of avi cane on the tiled floor, enjoying the sharp metallic click it made each time, which echoed very nicely echoed in the large, now empty room.

There was no one else in the waiting room at the moment, otherwise izi would have picked a less intrusive way to stimulate avi senses while izi waited. Ito picked for avi operation to be at the last slot of the day, to avoid waiting amongst large crowds. The pandemic wasn't over yet, and through the clinic required that patients be tested before they could enter, and wear quarantine shields, izi still felt much more safe avoiding the crowds altogether whenever possible.

There was some quiet music playing over the speakers, but it was completely orchestral, with no lyrics, and izi didn't know what it was from or what emotions it was supposed to be conveying. It was certainly fast-paced, izi would give it that. But was it supposed to be funny? Serious? Thrilling? Scary? Izi had no clue.

Izi /had/ been happily reading on avi phone up until a few minutes ago, but ito stopped when one of the staff had called avi name to let av know they'd be ready for av in just a few minutes.

They'd said that at least five long, boring minutes ago, but now izi didn't want to start reading again if izi was just going to be interrupted immediately, which izi figured izi would be, at this point, since they probably wouldn't make av wait that much longer...but what if they did? What if izi was wasting time being bored for no reason?

It was a familiar conundrum, and it was annoying, but mostly, izi was impatient not with boredom, but with excitement.

Today was the day izi finally got avi alterations, and got to donate avi own unwanted organs to those who could use them. The waitlist hadn't been that long, only a few months since ito signed up, much shorter than many people who'd come before av, since the technology was advancing every day, making things faster, but it had felt like a lifetime.

This was the day ito been dreaming of. Izi had spent the last few months scrolling through the update videos of other people who'd gotten the alterations, reading articles and blog posts, and had even ordered avi first magazine subscription, ever!

It was called Alterhuman Advancements Monthly, and each monthly issue included interviews and pre- and post-alteration photos of each

person who'd undergone the procedure, and their reasons for making the alterations. Some of them were transgender, some were transspecies, and some just really wanted to have wings or a tail or fur. New editions were published every month, and ito signed up for the retroactive purchase, so ito gotten all the past issues, too! It had taken two weeks to read all of them and catch up to the present. It was worth every penny.

Ito joined several online communities of other people on the waitlist, and of those who were planning to join, and had already gotten their alterations. It was so exciting.

Ito spent more than fifty hours looking at fiself in the VR dressing rooms, and now the day was finally here. Izi didn't have to wait any longer. It was a dream come true.

Izi had decided what alterations izi would get long before izi got up the courage to join the waitlist.

Izi of course was going to get a tail. Because who wouldn't want a tail? (Well, besides the conservatives who thought alterations were the worst thing to happen since...well, they couldn't seem to decide. A lot of them said the internet, some said Queer people, some said 'PC SJW Cringiness'). There were lots of tails to choose from, and

izi could even get multiple if izi wanted to! But to start with, izi was just going to get one, and if izi decided izi wanted more down the line, ito get them then, but not sooner.

That was one of the most often repeated tips from all the groups ito joined –if you needed to be able to walk, don't get multiple tails to start with, or the time you'd need to recover and adjust would be triple what it would be with just one. It was better to get one to start with, learn how to use it, then get more once you were ready.

That was one mistake Altera, one of the first and most famous people to get the full alterations, was very happy to admit to making, so other people wouldn't make the same mistake. Altera had gotten their three spade-ended tails all at once, and it had taken them almost a year of physical therapy to get their usual ability to balance themselves back. The anti-alterationist crowd had had a field day with that, and had spent its time making up all sorts of absurd claims about Altera, their health, the doctors who had treated them, their therapists, and anyone and everyone they could think of to sling mud at.

Even now that Altera was fully recovered and back to their normal level of mobility and balance, the anti-alterationists still lied about what had happened. Every time izi went to the grocery store, izi had

to see their stupid magazines sitting on the shelf, and it seemed that every time izi saw one, the claims were even more outrageous than before.

But all of that was beside the point, which was that izi was going to follow the advice of everyone ito talked to, and start out with just one tail.

There were so many options, izi almost hadn't known how to choose, but eventually ito settled on a simple, furry, prehensile tail that would start at the base of avi spine. At the end of the tail would be six collapsible tendrils almost like human fingers, but symmetrical and smoother looking. They could also be overlapped and layered to blend in with the rest of the fur, for aesthetic purposes. Some people went with a normal tail, some got another human hand at the end, but izi thought this would look cooler, and be more useful than the plain prehensile tail.

The tail would, of course, have its own set of vertebra, separate from avi spine, and would be even more flexible and strong than either of avi arms. If anything ever happened to avi tail, it wouldn't cause any damage to avi spine, and if anything ever happened and avi tail got caught with enough force, it would come off by itself, with no harm done to av.

Izi hadn't understood the point of this feature at all, until someone online explained that it was in case of emergencies, like if someone was attacking you and grabbed you by the tail to stop you from escaping. Or other things, like if you got stuck in a burning building or something with something heavy fallen across your tail that you couldn't lift, among other things.

Izi would also be able to manually uncouple avi tail if izi needed to, by flexing the muscles in a specific way. You could only learn how to do this once you'd actually gotten it attached, though, so that was something ito have to learn. It hadn't stopped av from watching tons of videos about it, though. Everyone made it look so easy, izi was sure izi would master it in no time.

Along with the tail, izi was also getting the alteration that would cause the rest of avi skin to grow fur, whose length izi would be able to customize at any time with avi personal encoder. Ito chosen the baseline length to be an inch long to start with, and it would be smooth and soft, like a shorthair domestic cat's. The default pattern ito chosen would be black with large white spots, to match avi favorite animal, the spotted skunk. They'd been making a major comeback in recent years due to conservation efforts, and izi could only hope the trend would continue.

Izi was also getting avi ears adjusted, changing the shape of the outer ear to make them larger and pointier. This didn't match avi spotted skunk aesthetic, but izi liked the look of pointed ears better than rounded ones. Plus, it just looked more noticeably nonhuman, and if izi was going to do this, izi might as well go all the way, right? Also, it was practically tradition at this point.

But one popular change izi did draw the line at was wings. Izi was afraid of heights, which izi thought was a completely reasonable fear to have, and no way was izi ever going to willingly fly, not even under avi own power.

Izi had had more than a few friends with wings offer to take av flying before over the past few years since the full alterations began to gain popularity, but ito turned them down every single time. Izi wanted to keep avi feet firmly planted on the ground, thank you very much.

Along with the new fur, izi was also getting avi eyes recolored. Avi left eye would become magenta, the right would become violet. They were avi favorite colors, and it would make av look even more awesome.

And while all this was going on, izi would also be getting the

structure of avi left leg (the one that was most likely to dislocate) reinforced to make walking less painful. Izi would still need avi cane, but this would make avi life a million times less stressful. Izi would come back again in a few months for them to reinforce the other leg once they saw how the first alteration worked with 'in the field' testing.

The doctors would also be changing the internal shape of avi eyes, so izi wouldn't have to wear glasses anymore. That was going to be weird as heck, but izi was looking forward to it immensely.

No more having to constantly clean dust off the lenses, no more breaking them and being unable to leave the house until izi could get new ones, no more just having to deal with the tiny scratches that built up over time, no more having them fog up when izi went outside and it was humid, or fogging up when it got too cold...it was going to be awesome. Izi would actually be able to see all the time, even when izi was in the shower, or swimming! Izi would be able to go to the beach and actually swim and still be able to see!

Avi friend would be picking av up to bring av home once avi surgery was over, since izi would have to keep the bandages on avi eyes for the first twelve hours, since they'd be more sensitive to light until they adjusted. Izi planned to spend most of that time sleeping, so that

was just fine with av.

There were so many changes izi was looking forward to, izi still found it hard to believe the day had finally come. Izi was half expecting the doctor to come into the lounge to tell av there'd been a mix-up and it wasn't actually avi turn yet, izi would have to come back another day.

But when the doctor did finally come out to get av a few minutes later, it wasn't to tell av there'd been a mix up. It was, indeed, avi turn, if izi still wanted the alterations. Izi would have been dismayed at the question, but izi knew they were required to ask, so izi listened to the clearly memorized spiel patently.

Izi could still change avi mind if izi wanted to, and there would be no consequences or retaliation. Izi would not have to pay any cancellation fees or pay the clinic any money for the inconvenience. If izi decided izi didn't want the alterations now, and changed avi mind again within the next to weeks, izi would be given the next position in the waiting list, once they were done with whoever they'd taken in the meantime. Izi nodded along at the right moments and answered “yes” to every “do you understand what I've told you?”

There was one more paper izi needed to sign right before they began,

certifying that izi was giving the clinic permission, once and for all, to apply the alterations. The alterations could be removed again at any time, and izi could have them removed at any capable facility, it didn't have to be this clinic, or another clinic run by the same organization. Izi could even buy the alteration-removal drugs over the counter as long as izi had the proper ID certifying izi was of age.

Izi signed the last document happily, without a shred of hesitation, and willingly followed the doctor – a green-skinned, dragon-like woman with streaks of gold in his purple hair, and a long tail with a spade on the end – down the hall, and into avi new life.

022: Tutorial Sword

Neopronouns: ky/shal/shalk/shalself, which will follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this story.

Replace he with ky

Replace him with shal

Replace his with shalk

Replace himself with shalself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ky is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ky gets a fence

set up around shalk yard so the puppy can go outside without shal having to walk it. Shalk uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting shal use, since ky lost shalk. Ky's going to buy toys and train the puppy shalself."

022: Tutorial Sword

“Hey, who’s that Necromancer over there? Do you know ter pronouns? The one with the silver sword and the skeleton dog over by the forge. Do you know where mys got that sword? It looks awesome. Do you think mys’d trade me?”

“Oh, Veyis? Shalk pronouns are ky/shal/shalk/shalself. And as for the sword, no, I don’t think ky’d trade you for it. That sword is Sentimental for shal, since it originally belonged to shalk parent, and they got it off a commander they defeated, so no, I don’t think you’ll have any luck convincing shal to trade it for yours. No one wants one of the standard issue ones, they’re all too impatient and reckless.

“Why do you think you’re the only one who still has theirs? These idiots say they’re cursed, can you believe it? A sword that can’t be looted, that tells you everything you need to know about this game, and they want nothing to do with it. Most of these idiots get rid of it the first battle they face. If you didn’t know, when you defeat an enemy in battle, you can loot any items from them that you want except for their base layer of clothing, and any Sentimental items. You know how I said Veyis got shalk sword from shalk parent? Yeah, that means it’s Sentimental, and no one is allowed to loot it, since the Sentimental Exemption applies to it. The rules for what can

and can't be Sentimental are pretty complicated, so I won't go into them now, but that's also why Veyis has two swords, since everyone has to carry at least one weapon that can be looted. Anyone can carry multiple weapons, but after a while it just becomes cumbersome.

“You don't get an extra carry slot when you have a Sentimental object, and with the extra weapon you're required to carry if you have a Sentimental weapon, you end up permanently losing a slot, and especially when it comes to the higher tier battles, every item you bring counts, which is why not a lot of people keep Sentimental items, or at least not Sentimental weapons.”

“So let me get this right, everyone hates the default swords because they give you a tutorial, but then you're also going to give me a tutorial?”

“Yeah, because I get paid to tell the new people how things work. Everyone gets rid of their standard issue sword the first chance they get, so they end up not knowing how to do even basic things like bathing or weapon and armour maintenance. So since I decided to keep mine around until I actually knew what I was doing, everyone decided to elect me the official tutorial tutor, since none of the other experienced players have the patience to teach new people. Everyone who survives a battle using techniques or skills I taught

them gives me at 10% of any coins they picked up during the fight.”

“Wait, so now I’m going to have to pay you since you’re telling me this? You could have lead with that! That’s not fair!”

“No, no, you’re still level 1, so you’re exempt. Plus, you still have your sword, so it could teach you anything I can. You’d only have to start paying me once you hit level 3 if you’d already gotten rid of your sword. You don’t have to worry about paying me as long as you have that sword. The lessons it gives you run out at level 50, so you can imagine the slack I’m picking up by teaching the people who got rid of their sword during their first fight. Without me, this team wouldn’t have any idea how to do Spells or Techniques or Crafting. I was one of the founding four, and trust me, if I hadn’t had the common sense to keep my sword, this team wouldn’t even exist right now.”

“Wow. So you’ve been doing this for five years?”

“Yep. Almost six, actually, the anniversary is next month on the 2nd.”

“Woah. So, okay, if you know everything, is there a way I can change how my sword looks without getting rid of it? I like the

tutorial feature, but it's really plain looking. I want something dramatic or cool. Or at least I want to change the color, I have my eye on an outfit from the Jareq's and I want it to match."

"Well, you're in luck. Remember our sentimental Necromancer over there?"

"Yeah."

"Ky's our Craftsmaster. Ky can reforge your sword into different shapes and styles, and can dye it different colors for you too. If you're patient enough, ky'll even teach you how to do it yourself. Ky's always complaining that ky has to do everything because no one else wants to learn. I think at this point ky's literally paying people to become shalk apprentice, just so ky can have someone to help out with the list of orders."

"Wait, really?"

"Well, you'd have to ask shal if that offer is still on, I've been too busy with the new recruits to hang out with shal the last few days. Ky's friendly, especially towards new people, and shalk skele doesn't bite anyone that doesn't threaten shal, so don't worry about talking to shal or anything.

“If you want, I’ll even walk you over and introduce you and ask shal about reforging your sword. But before we do, you should think of a name for your sword if you haven’t already, you have to give it a name when you reforge it, and it has to be unique. If you open your journal, you can check which names are available, and it’ll suggest some for you if you can’t think of one.”

“Well, I’ve been calling it Chirithy in my head...uh, it’s from a video game, one of the older ones that you played on a cellphone.”

“Well, lets go to your journal and check if that name’s available. It definitely sounds unique so I bet it is—ah, look at that, it is! So we’d better hurry and get your sword reforged now, someone else out there might have the same idea! Trust me when I tell you that when you find a name you want, do not hesitate to claim it. Just don’t. Don’t worry about picking the new form for it yet, you can just reforge it into something quick and basic just to save the name, then you can come back later and choose a more intricate form. Come on, I’ll introduce you!”

“Okay, yeah, let’s go!”

“Hey, Veyis! Get that forge started back up to five, we need you to reforge a sword quick before the name gets taken!”

“Don’t yell at shal, ky’ll get mad!”

“Oh, don’t worry kid, this is just what we do. Plus, it takes time to heat the forge to the right temperature, and ky hates having to wait when ky could be doing something productive. Trust me, if we waited until we got all the way over there to tell shal what temperature we need, and then ky had to stand around and wait for it to get to the right heat even after ky already knew what ky was going to make, ky’d be a lot less happy to help.”

“Oh. Hey, wait a second, do I have to pay shal to reforge my sword? I only have fifteen coins the opening fight gave me, and I don’t know what the economy is like yet...”

“Ky usually charges around fifty coins for a reforging to cover the cost of the materials, but this one’s on me. Fifteen coins isn’t a lot, it’s mainly supposed to get you buying things, since the basic gear from Jareq only cost two coins each. While you’re buying the basic armour, you also get to look at all the cooler stuff you can buy later, so you’ll want to get more coins to buy them, so you’ll keep coming back for more fights. And since they release new outfits every other month, you always have a reason to keep coming back.”

“Please take this as a compliment—I can tell you’re the teacher

around here.”

“I do take it as a compliment. Thank you!”

“So why are you paying for my sword? I mean, I’m grateful, and I’ll pay you back later, but why? Do you just have a lot of coins?”

“I’ll tell you why. It’s because you’re reforging your standard issue sword. The more you like that thing, the more likely you’ll keep it, and the longer you keep it, the less work there is for me as long as you stick around. You know how I said Veyis is sick of being the only crafter? Well I’m sick of being the only one around here who can or will teach anyone how to do stuff. We need another jack of all trades, and if you’re willing to keep that sword around, you might just become it.”

“So Veyis will pay me to be shalk apprentice, and you’re bribing me to become your apprentice too?”

“Yep.”

“Are there any other teachers around here who are willing to pay for students?”

“Oh you better believe it.”

023: The Wild Dragon

Neopronouns: shey/shem/sheir/sheirself which follow the same rules as they/them/their/(theirs)/themselves.

Replace they with shey

Replace them with shem

Replace their with sheir

Replace theirs with sheirs

Replace themselves with sheirself

EX:

"They are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as they get a fence set up around their yard so the puppy can go outside without them having to walk it. Their uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting them use, since they lost theirs. They're going to buy toys and train the puppy themselves."

Becomes:

"They are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as they get a fence set up around their yard so the puppy can go outside without them having to walk it. Their uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting them use, since they lost theirs. They're going to buy toys and train the puppy themselves."

023: The Wild Dragon part 1

Lore crouched at the edge of the forest, holding as still as they could, trying not to startle the tiny dragon that had alighted just a few feet away, perched on a low branch of a tree, preening itself. It hadn't noticed them yet, and they wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible. This wasn't the first wild dragon they'd ever seen, but it was the first time they'd ever seen this close to one without any fences or other barriers between them.

They breathed as slowly and quietly as they could, wondering how long it would take for the dragon to notice their presence. Their grasp on their mental abilities was weak, to say the least. They'd never been any good at reading other people's signs, not even when they were apparently making them as bright as possible. They didn't know if it would work, but they were aiming their thoughts at the dragon as much as they could, trying to create an aura of welcoming calmness despite the way their heart felt like it was going to burst out of their chest in excitement.

Wild dragons were notoriously hard to befriend, even more difficult than feral ones. Most people didn't think it was worth it, since wild dragons didn't get as big and weren't as adaptable or as house-friendly as common ones.

They didn't know how long they sat there, practically holding their breath, trying to mentally tap the dragon on the shoulder so they could tell it "HI! I'm friendly! Want to be friends?"

But eventually, their legs got tired from the way they were crouching, and they had to move, shifting their now-pained legs to a better position.

That got the dragon's attention, and it snapped upright from where it had started to curl around the branch to sleep, and its wide, startled eyes turned directly to where they were sitting.

Lore froze for a second, then gathered their courage, and said as calmly as possible, "Hi."

The dragon stared at them, not moving, its eyes locked with their own.

Was it talking to them? Was it trying to send them signs? Could it read what they'd been trying to tell it now that it was looking at them?

Hoping against hope, they started to say, "My name's—"

In a flash, the dragon was gone, shooting off further into the woods

and disappearing out of sight within a few seconds.

“...Lore...” shey trailed off, disappointment warring with the shock that shey’d even been lucky enough to get so close in the first place.

Finally, the sheer fortune of the entire encounter beat out the disappointment of not accomplishing a miracle, and shey laughed as shey pushed sheirself painfully to sheir feet, still scanning the trees, hoping to catch a glimpse of the dragon again.

Mentally, shey was cataloguing the details of the dragon as shey reluctantly began to continue on sheir walk, listing out its noticeable characteristics so shey would be able to recognize it if shey saw it again. This had been a very young dragon, so it was likely that this was an area it was in often, since younger dragons had smaller territories.

And where there was one, there were more, so even though shey hadn’t had much luck with this one this time, that didn’t mean sheir luck would be just as bad the next time shey saw it, or if shey encountered a different one entirely.

Maybe, just to be safe, shey would start carrying a bag of dragon treats with shem.

Technically it was cheating, but they figured it was fair, since they couldn't read or send signs the way other people could.

* * *

Three days later

* * *

“Hey, Lore, didn't you say you saw a wild dragon around here a few days ago?” Becui asked, suddenly stopping so she could stare into the trees, craning her neck back to look up into the branches.

Lore stopped too, mostly because if they hadn't, they would have crashed into Becui, who had stopped in the middle of the path without warning. “It wasn't here exactly,” Lore said, “It was maybe ten more minutes ahead.” They pointed in the direction they'd been walking.

They remembered where they'd seen the dragon mainly because there was a conveniently fallen tree just a foot from where the dragon had landed.

Usually, they had a horrible sense of direction, and wouldn't have been able to even tell you how to get to the general area, let alone

the exact location. Luckily for shem the fallen tree was eye-catching and hard to miss, an easy landmark amidst an otherwise confusing mass of greenery where all the trees looked the same, and the well-maintained path had few variations.

Becui turned to look the way shey'd pointed, looking excited.

“Maybe we'll see it again! I bet I could convince it we're friendly!”

Lore had told Becui about sheir fear that the dragon had been trying to talk to shem, not realizing shey couldn't see the signs it was sending shem, or that shey wasn't even sure shey were sending anything to it at all.

Unlike Lore, Becui could send and see signs with no problem at all. For her, it was second nature, as easy as breathing. For Lore, it was like trying to breathe through a straw. Shey could never see anything people said they were sending shem, even when they insisted they were making them as bright and garish as possible.

For the first ten or so years of sheir life, shey'd actually assumed that no one could see signs, they were just speaking metaphorically or trying to be poetic. But no, they meant it literally. They could all apparently literally send and see messages and words and feeling to each other through patterns and shapes of color that shey couldn't

see or create sheirself.

Sometimes, when they were feeling especially frustrated with sheir failings at communicating with others, they wondered to sheirself if the whole thing was just some big, mean joke everyone else was playing on shem.

But they knew what wasn't actually true. The odds of shem being the butt of a joke that spanned the whole of history on the entire planet was just...not even remotely in the realm of possibility. Not unless someone who really hated shem was going to invent time travel at some point just to spite shem.

Well, they couldn't say they didn't have any enemies. The other kids could sniff out people who were different faster than they could finish saying "hello", and to them, different automatically meant wrong. No matter where sheir family moved, they never had many friends, and more people seemed to hate shem just because they dared to exist near them than they'd even spoken to.

Becui was bullied too, though not because she had any problems speaking. She had burn scars on her face, neck, left arm, and part of her torso from an accident she'd been in as a baby, leaving her missing an eye, and with reduced strength and movement in that

arm.

Thankfully, she had no memories of the accident that had caused it, and the scars didn't normally cause her pain, but she her face and arm were different, and for the bullies, that was excuse enough for cruelty.

Becui and Lore helped each other stand up to the bullies, though nothing they ever did actually got them to stop. It was a friendship formed by adversity, and cemented through shared interests in wildlife, reading, writing, and wondering why anyone would purposefully choose to be cruel when not doing that was so easy.

Lore wanted to sighed as she thought about it, but smiled for Becui instead. "Come on," she said, remembering the thrill of excitement she'd felt when she first set eyes on the dragon, "I'll show you where it was!"

024: The Universe Likes you

Neopronouns: an/droid/androidself which follow the same rules as it/its/itself

Replace it with an

Replace its with droid

Replace itself with androidself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"An is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as an gets a fence set up around droid yard so the puppy can go outside without an having to walk it. Droid uncle is going to help set up the fence, since

he has a set of power tools he's letting an use, since an lost doid.
An's going to buy toys and train the puppy androidself.”

024: The Universe Likes You

Saint stared at Lonicera, uncomprehending. “I’m sorry, what?” An said, sure an’d misheard.

There was absolutely no way he’d just told droid that he wanted droid to—

“I want you to take this bomb, and use it to destroy the universe.” Lonicera said, exactly like Saint’d thought an’d heard him say the first time.

An stated.

“What?”

“I know it sounds drastic—” Lonicera said in what was apparently supposed to be a reassuring tone of voice, “But it’s the only way to save the universe.”

“Blowing up the universe is the only way to save it?!” There was no way they were having this conversation.

“Yes.” Lonicera said, anyways.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

Saint stared. Lonicera was serious.

“Well...” Lonicera amended after a few seconds, “It’s not so much a bomb as a reset button. Except it is also a bomb, because it is going to blow up, and it will destroy the universe, but it’ll only destroy this version of the universe. It’ll reset it to an earlier version so it can continue down a different path. This version became irreparably corrupted because of what Vitex did to it, and if we don’t reset it soon it’ll be destroyed for real with no chance of recovery. This bomb has to be set off on a specific planet so that it’ll destroy this universe in the right way that it’ll be reset instead of wiped from existence entirely. You have to take it to that planet and you have to find a place to set it off.”

Oh this was not happening. Except that it was.

“Why are you telling me this?” An demanded, “I’m not a scientist! I’m not an astronaut! I’ve never even left the territory, let alone the gods damned planet! And you’re talking about leaving the solar system! I don’t even know you! You don’t even know me! We just

met a few hours ago! How do you know I'm not one of Vitex's minions? How do you know I'm not going to use this to convert the universe into the energy those people from the alterverse were after?"

"Because the universe itself picked you. It likes you."

"What??"

025: Race to the Top

Neopronouns: che/chim/chis/chimself, xi/xir/xirself,
thi/hil/(hilz)/hilself

che/chim/chis/chimself follows the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with che

Replace him with chim

Replace his with chis

Replace himself with chimself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Che is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as che gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without chim having to walk it. Chis uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting chim use, since che lost chis. Che's going to buy toys and train the puppy chimself."

xi/xir/(xirs)/xirself follows the same rules as she/her/(hers)/herself:

replace she with xi

replace her with xir

replace hers with xirs

replace herself with xirself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

becomes:

"Xi is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as xi gets a fence set up around xir yard so the puppy can go outside without xir having to walk it. Xir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting xir use, since xi lost xirs. Xi's going to buy toys and train the puppy xirself."

thi/hil/(hilz)/hilself also follows the same rules as
she/her/(hers)/herself

replace she with thi

replace her with hil

replace hers with hilz

replace herself with hilself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers."

becomes:

"Thi is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as thi gets a fence set up around hil yard so the puppy can go outside without hil having to walk it. Hil uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting thi use, since thi lost hilz."

025: Race to the Top

Chase craned his head back to stare up at the cliff of grey rock, trying and failing to see the top through the thick mist that circled the higher parts.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Keywin whispered, keeping his voice low as though afraid the mountain itself would hear him, “Agni said we could go with him- -”

“No,” Chase corrected, “Agni said that if he saw us on the trail, he would throw us off of it. You missed the rest of that conversation.”

Keywin stared up at Chase with large eyes. “Did he really say that?”

Chase explained, “Agni thinks the trail is bad, because his family bribed the guide that tends to it. He said if he sees us anywhere near it, he’ll throw us off the side. We can’t take the trail, we have to climb up here.”

Chase stared up at the cliff again, at the hard grey stone and the menacing clouds that circled the peak. He tried to muster his courage. “We can do this,” he said, “It’s just like at home.”

Keywin followed chis gaze back to the cliff. “I don’t know where you live, but my home has nothing like this. Not even remotely.” Chase felt xir tighten xir hold on the harness that kept xir in place on chis back.

“It’ll be a piece of cake.” Che said, trying to sound reassuring, “The ravines near Tiyo go way deeper than this thing does high, and I’ve spent years climbing up and down them.”

Keywin didn’t say anything, either to argue further or concede, and Chase knew it was because xi knew that no matter how afraid xi was of falling, they couldn’t afford not to climb.

They had to beat Ahni to the top. They had to get to the spring before thi did.

They had to convince the guardian not to listen to hil, not to accept hil bargain.

Chase eyed the cliff, judging the distances between areas where che would be able to grip the stone with chis claws. Yes, che was confidant che could climb this.

It was simply a matter of making the first leap.

The ravine that separated them from the side of the cliff was ten feet across.

Easy enough, on its own, but once Chase leapt, it wouldn't simply be a matter of landing. It would be a matter of grabbing onto the cliff quickly enough and smoothly enough not to fall, and without hurting Keywin.

/I can do this,/ Chase thought to himself, /I have to do this./

026: The Great Machine, Parts 1 & 2: On the Road, and The First Night

Neopronouns: xe/xim/xis/ximself, ze/zim/zis/zimself,
li/lia/las/liaself

All three sets follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself:

Replace he with xe, ze, or li

Replace him with xim, zim, or lia

Replace his with xis, zis, or las

Replace himself with ximself, zimself, or laself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Xe is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as xe gets a fence set up around xis yard so the puppy can go outside without xim having to walk it. Xis uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting xim use, since xe lost xis. Xe's going to buy toys and train the puppy ximself."

or

"Ze is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ze gets a fence set up around zis yard so the puppy can go outside without zim having to walk it. Zis uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting zim use, since ze lost zis. Ze's going to buy toys and train the puppy zimself."

or

"Li is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as li gets a fence set up around lias yard so the puppy can go outside without lia having to walk it. Lias uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting lia use, since li lost lias. Li's going to buy toys and train the puppy liaself."

A partial set of alternate first person pronouns are also used, with each instance of "I" replaced with "Dy".

026 The Great Machine, Part 1: On the Road:

“Please state your name for the record.” the voice came from the intercom higher up the wall, sounding like this was a script they’d read many times.

“Uh, I’m Veyk.” Veyk said, not sure where xe was supposed to be looking. There was what xe’d assumed from a distance was a window in front of xim, but it was just a ledge sticking out of the wall. No glass or sliding panels. Xe decided that looking at the intercom was probably xis best bet.

If they had an intercom, and they knew xe was out here, they probably had cameras too. “Am I in the right place? I was looking for - -”

“Please state your full name for the record.” The voice sounded like this was something they had to say a lot too.

“Full name? I - -” Veyk stared up at the intercom, bewildered. “It’s just Veyk. I don’t know what you mean by full name.”

“Your full name would potentially include your family name, clan name, village name, or any other names that are used to identify you

and to distinguish you from others with your personal name, including titles. If you're from beyond Clade's Edge - -"

"Yes!" Veyk interrupted, relieved to hear a familiar term, "I only just crossed the border a few days ago. I was told to go to Bricklayer, a crier that came to the territory promised me a job working on the Great Machine. He said he would send word ahead of me, so they'd know I was coming."

Normally, xe would never travel so far just to find a paying job, but the crier had promised that the pay would be more than xe could ever dream of finding elsewhere, and food, lodging, and medical services would be supplied at no extra cost, to both the worker and any family members they brought with them.

Veyk had left Xaurec, Aryl, and Kanta back at the camp they'd slept at last night while xe went ahead to investigate the wall that cut through part of the valley, hoping they'd already reached their destination.

None of them had ever left the territory before, let alone gone as far as Bricklayer, but the crier had assured them that if they followed the eastern rode, they wouldn't be able to miss it.

Well, they'd followed the road this far, and the wall here stuck out like a sore thumb. Surely, this had to be the - -

“If you're trying to get to Bricklayer, you have to follow the road another fifty miles east. This is Brox, we aren't part of the Coalition for the Great Machine. You can enter the city once we register you, and spend the night at open ports, but it won't be free.”

Veyk hesitated. “Are kelwyn allowed in?” Xe finally asked, thinking xe already knew the answer, but hoping for a pleasant surprise. Most of the people within the clade didn't hide the fact that they hated people from beyond the edge, and they especially hated kelwyn. The crier had promised that things weren't like that in Bricklayer, but this wasn't Bricklayer.

“Yes...”

Veyk heard a 'but' in there. It was obvious that while technically legal, kelwyn weren't actually welcome.

And you know what? Xe didn't even really want to stick around to find out the details.

“Well, I'll just be going, then.” Xe said abruptly. Xe needed to get

back to the others and let them know they'd be staying out on the road at least another two days. They had plenty of supplies, but they would have to make it to the next camping spot before nightfall, and xe'd already wasted time on this fruitless endeavor.

“I've heard that things are better in Bricklayer!” The voice called out as xe began to walk away, “Good luck!”

Veyk just rolled xis eyes, and began the jog back to the main road.

026: The Great Machine: Part 2: The First Night

“Hey guys, say hi to our new digger, Veyk! Xe just moved here from past Clade’s Edge, and xe came all this way just to work on the Great Machine with us, so I know you’ll all give xim a very warm welcome, isn’t that right, Lern?”

One of the people scattered around the fire in the middle of the camp threw their arms into the air and protested, “I didn’t even do anything yet!”

“Exactly!” Kvalic slashed a wing through the air for emphasis.

“Keep it that way!”

Veyk wasn’t sure whether to be alarmed or amused. Kvalic hadn’t mentioned anything about a troublestarter on the walk over. Xe wasn’t sure how seriously xe was supposed to be taking this interaction. Did Lern actually do something wrong with past workers, or was this just some sort of inside joke?

“Uh, should I be worried?” Xe asked hesitantly, keeping xis voice low so only Kvalic could hear.

But instead of giving a serious answer like xe hoped, Kvalic just

laughed loudly, and lightly slapped xis shoulder with a wing, cackling, “Only if you like fish!”

This caused a scattering of laughter from some of the other workers, except for Lern, who continued to protest their innocence in what sounded like genuine grievance.

Veyk was glad xe was wearing a mask to keep out the dust and night insects, because it meant xe didn’t have to keep the annoyed scowl off xis face.

If these people were going to be this annoying the whole time xe was working with them, xe had the feeling xe wouldn’t be working here long.

Kvalic abruptly turned and left without any further conversation or warning, apparently deciding that that was enough of an introduction that zis job here was done, leaving Veyk standing awkwardly at the edge of the circle, with no idea what to do next.

There were at least three different species of people here, none of whom were even the same species as Kvalic, and Veyk had no idea what kind of etiquette they would expect from xim.

Fortunately, one of them decided to take pity on xis clear confusion, and came over to greet xim properly, stepping over other people's assorted legs and tails and lounging bodies to join xim at the edge of the circle while the rest of them went back to talking amongst themselves.

They were another quadruped, but unlike xim, they had two pairs of arms, not just one. Their legs were in the middle of their body, with the front pair hending backwards, and the back pair bending forwards, with a matching set of arms in front of and behind them.

From what xe could tell just by looking, they appeared to have hard, chitin like armour like an insect, instead of fur, feathers, scales, bark, or skin.

Most of their body was orange, with thick, lighter yellow stripes on the back of their thorax, and smaller light yellow spots on their abdomen. The top parts of their arms and legs were grey-brown, and their hands, lower legs, and feet were bright yellow, reflecting back the light of the fire whenever they moved. Their head sat at the front of their body on a short neck, and was shaped like an oval, with a single large, orange eye at the front, two depressions that might have been ears or a nose on the sides, and mandibles for a mouth.

“Hello,” They said, sitting down in front of xim and holding out both of their front hands in a familiar greeting. Xe copied them gratefully, sitting down in the tough grass and reaching forward with xis fronds.

Theirs were smaller than xis, with three appendages tipped with long, hard claws, in sharp contrast to xis six flexible tendrils. Since xis fronds were softer, xe placed xis on top of theirs, and they touched them together for a moment before pulling back.

Nothing exciting happened, which xe’d been expecting, but surprisingly, there was a slight tingle on the tips of xis tendrils, indicating that at least some sort of transference had happened, just not enough to tell anything by, at least on xis end.

“My name’s Veyk.” Xe said, not sure how much information they’d gotten out of that, “I’m phaen, and I go by xe, xim, xis, and ximself. What about you? I’m sorry, our chemicals aren’t compatible enough for me to have gotten any information.”

The quadruped opened their mandibles wide in what xe recognized easily as a friendly smile. “My name is Oleili Tevisi, and you can call me Oleili, it’s my personal name. I am liavnu, and I go by li, lia, lias, and liaself. It’s nice to meet you, Veyk. I’m sorry Kvalic seems to have abandoned you, ze does that with everyone. Ze seems to

think that being dropped into a situation without help is the best way to learn, which is why it's a very good thing ze isn't in charge of anything except giving new hires the tour."

"And just for the record!" A voice called out from the circle that Veyk recognized as Lern's, "I'm not going to eat you, no matter what Kvalic else says! Ze's just joking, and don't know how to convey it!"

"No," Another voice piped up, "Dy'm pretty sure at this point ze just refuses to learn.. Dy've been here since the start and Dy tried to teach zim when Dy first met zim, and no matter how many times Dy explain it to zim, ze never listens. Ze doesn't want to learn, ze thinks we should all just be able to magically tell when ze's joking and when ze's being serious."

Yeah, that fit with what Veyk had seen of Kvalic so far. Xe shook xis head in exasperation. "Doesn't ze know how hard it is to read the tone and body language of an unfamiliar species?"

"Yes," Oleili said, "But ze doesn't care. Ze thinks its everyone else's problem. There have been many complains to zis superiors, but no one ever does anything. We have a theory that ze's a favorite sibling of one of the council members, but no one knows for sure." Li stood,

gesturing with lia head towards the crowded circle. “Enough about our annoying boss. Come sit with us, we can all properly introduce ourselves, and you can get something to eat. You get your first rations on the first full day you work, so you’ll get yours tomorrow, but we always pool ours, and there are plenty to go around.”

Li lead the way, and xe followed, grateful that the other workers were considerate enough this time to pull their legs and tails and other appendages out of the way so xe could walk past them without worrying about stepping on anyone.

They’d all arranged themselves in circles around the stove in the middle of the clearing, with smaller people close to the fire and larger people in the back, though it didn’t seem to be a universal rule. Some people were sitting on the dirt or grass itself, some were sitting on blankets, and a few had cushions.

Oleili led xim to an open space in the middle where li had been sitting on a dark green blanket, and someone threw a cushion so that it landed right in front of Veyk. Xe jumped in surprise, then called in the general direction it had come from, “Thanks!” right as another cushion flew through the air and slammed into xis face.

It was heavy enough to knock xim to the ground, and the shock of it left xim dazed for a few seconds, trying to figure out what had happened and why xis face and shoulder suddenly hurt.

The camp was suddenly humming with thunderous vibrations, but xe couldn't figure out what anyone was saying past the dull throb in the side of xis head where it had hit the dirt.

Xe pushed ximself upright, lifting a frond to xis face to make sure xe wasn't bleeding, and found ximself staring into Oleili's single large eye, wide with concern, less than a few inches from xis face. Xe jerked back instinctively, and felt the fragile metal of xis hearing-aid dislodge even further.

Oleili backed up a bit to give xim more space, and lia mandibles opened and closed, but xe couldn't make sense of it. Li didn't have lips for xim to read, and even if li did, xe didn't speak the language, and without xis hearing-aid and translator, xe couldn't hear or understand what anyone was trying to say.

Xe guessed that li was asking if xe was okay, and lifted both xis fronds to reassure li, and did xis best to say clearly, "I'm okay, my hearing-aid just got knocked loose, I can't understand you, I have to fix it first." Xe could feel it inside xis ear, the two main pieces

knocked out of the base. They were all connected with tiny wires that were rooted in xis skull, so there wasn't any danger of them falling out of xis ear entirely, but xe had to fix them before xe would be able to hear or understand anyone that didn't speak the sign-language xe'd grown up with.

Most of the other workers had gotten to their feet and gathered around Veyk, as well as another person further back in the crowd that xe couldn't see past the gathered people, probably the person who'd thrown the second cushion. Veyk was giving them the benefit of the doubt and assuming that hitting xim in the face had been an accident.

Oleili was trying to talk to xim again, moving lia mandibles and gesturing with lia hands in a way that meant nothing that xe could understand.

But there should be nothing stopping lia from understanding or hearing xim, so xe said again, enunciating as best xe could when xe couldn't hear the sounds xe was making, "I'm not hurt, but my hearing-aid was knocked loose, and I have to get my friend to fix it for me. Can you show me the way back to the main entrance? They're not a worker, they're just visiting, so they're camped outside. I'll know my way from there, I just don't remember how to

get back to the entrance. Can you show me?”

Trying to speak out loud when xe couldn't hear what xe was saying was always hit or miss. Xe couldn't tell if xe was speaking too loudly, or not loudly enough.

Oleili seemed confused, but after a moment li deliberately nodded lia head, then glanced over lia shoulder to say something to the rest of the crowd.

Then li turned back to Veyk and gestured for xim to turn around, so xe did so, heading back towards the spot where Kvalic had left xim at the entrance to the clearing as the crowd parted to let xim pass without issue, many of them looking concerned.

Xe resisted the urge to sigh as Oleili moved past xim to lead xim down the correct path. The annoyance wasn't directed at lia though.

This was a frequent issue with xis hearing-aid, and finding a solution was one of the reasons xe'd decided to come all this way to Bricklayer and work on the Great Machine.

The the main reason was that the surgeons in Bricklayer were probably the only people within a year's journey that could perform

the surgeries that Aryl and Xaurec needed. Veyk had gotten xis years and years ago, before the town surgeon had passed away.

The other reason was that Kanta was looking for mates for the first time, and wanted the good luck that came with pairing with people who lived far away. Especially if xe could convince some of them to return with them when they went back to their territory, and bring their luck with them.

Hopefully some of that luck would rub off on Veyk so that xe could find someone besides Xaurec who could fix xis hearing-aid for xim. Or so that xe would be able to find someone who could permanently stabilize it sooner rather than later. Or maybe just someone who was smart enough to build an entirely new one from scratch.

The scientist who had created it for xim had disappeared just as abruptly as he had appeared, dashing all over the territory with his companion like a kaliba that had broken into the stores of fermenting fruit. Veyk didn't even know his name, he'd just called himself a doctor without elaborating further. Veyk didn't know where he was from, who he was related to, or where xe could find him again.

Maybe he would be here, working on the Great Machine, but he had disappeared so quickly that Veyk wasn't going to get xis hopes up.

Maybe xe would never see him again, and would just have to hope that xe could find someone else who knew how to work the hearing-aid enough to fix it.

It obviously hadn't been designed for twoqi use, unless whoever had designed it had wanted it to be so obnoxious and inconvenient that at times Veyk was tempted to rip it out and throw it into the creek.

And oh, how convenient. There was a creek that ran parallel to the path Oleili was leading xim down now, lia orange markings seeming to glow in the darkness. Xe could rip the darn thing out of xis ear and chuck it in to be swept away if xe wanted to.

But...xe wasn't quite that annoyed with it just yet.

Xaurec could fix it for xim tonight, and tomorrow... well, tomorrow was xis first day of labor, so xe would have to wait and see what exactly that entailed before making any final decisions.

Until then, xe followed Oleili into the deepening night, hoping things would be better in the morning.

027: Crash Landing on Earth

Neopronouns: neo/neos/neoself, used the same was as it/its/itself

Replace it with neo

Replace its with neos

Replace itself with neoself

EX:

“It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself.”

Becomes:

"Neo is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as neo gets a fence set up around neos yard so the puppy can go outside without neo having to walk it. Neos uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting neo use, since neo lost

neos. Neo's going to buy toys and train the puppy neoself.”

027: Crash Landing on Earth

The reports started flooding in, almost overwhelming neos interface with the sudden deluge of information. Temperature, humidity, salinity, too many statistics for neo to keep up with by neoself.

But Razing was still offline, and to make everything worse, the proximity alarms started screaming overhead, several minutes far too late, the ghost of Razing's sensor contact finally catching up with real time.

The warning song scared the iflings even more than they'd already been frightened out of their tiny wits, and neo felt them prickling on neos back, digging their claws in deeper so they couldn't be pried away. Neos planetsuit would stop that from happening in any case except for the worst possible scenario, but it was an instinctive holdover from much harsher times, and right now, neo was just comforted to know they were all safe and accounted for. Every one of them had packed themselves down into the very bottom of their cradle cells, leaving the only cold spots in the six hexes that neo'd eaten on the disastrous trip here when the rest of the supplies ran out, all along the front, where they were easiest to reach.

That left neo with thirty-one iflings left, and neo intended to keep it

that way. Neo had come out here to the stars to show neos children the wonders of the universe, neo wasn't going let something like a crash landing stop that from happening.

Neo was going to get Razing back online, figure out what had crashed into them and knocked Razing out, and get back on course.

Assuming neo could figure out what that course was supposed to be. The last time neo'd been able to look at the navigational systems, neo'd had no idea where they were. This was not the first time they'd been slapped out of their path, though, this time it hadn't been so much 'slapped' as 'pulled with all the sudden force of gravity'.

They had been more than far enough away from the well of this planet's gravity to avoid any disturbances. They might have been in an unfamiliar stellar system, in an unfamiliar section of the galaxy, but gravity still functioned by the same rules as it always had - - they should /not/ have been pulled down to this planet at all, let alone so suddenly and violently that poor Razing blacked out from the force of it.

The only upside to this whole situation was that tal hadn't been conscious for their entry into the atmosphere - - tal'd always been afraid of crashing, and now it had finally happened. Maybe it was

for the best that Razing had been knocked out before it happened. Neo knew that if neos worst fear ever came true (becoming the host to a farik, which had been a reoccurring nightmare ever since neo was a crawler [why neos family had thought it was a good idea to show crawlers such a documentary, neo would never understand]), and neo had the choice, neo would rather be unconscious until it was over.

Well no, there was another upside - - they were all still alive. Neo could feel Razing's life signs deep inside, still going strong, just subdued and dreaming for the moment.

Neo pushed neos senses out beyond Razing's hull, trying to get a sense of their surroundings. There were still too many status reports for neo to sort through without Razing's help, but this at least would let neo get an idea of the situation.

Neo felt a sensation of liquid, along with gas - - it didn't take much guesswork to figure out they'd crashed into a body of liquid of some sort, and were floating on the surface, which meant it was denser than the oceans on Liavar. It also wasn't burning Razing or causing any sort of adverse reaction, so as long as nothing attacked them, they were probably safe enough, for now.

And as though the universe itself wanted to spite neos optimism, outside, at the very edges of neos senses, there was movement.

Heavy, big movement, approaching from below at a diagonal.

Something was coming, and if neos senses were to be trusted, it was as big, or bigger, than Razing.

And tal was still unconscious. There were no defensive systems neo could access without Razing's help. They were defenseless.

The shape came closer, and there was nothing neo could do about it.

028: You Learn Something New Everyday

Neopronouns: ne/rix/riv/rixelf which follow the same rules as
he/him/his/himself

Replace he with ne

Replace him with rix

Replace his with riv

Replace himself with rixelf

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ne is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ne gets a fence set up around riv yard so the puppy can go outside without rix having to walk it. Riv uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting rix use, since ne lost riv. Ne's going to buy toys and train the puppy rixelf."

028: You Learn Something New Everyday

Pandora hadn't been expecting riv friends to reach up and pull rix off the wall once ne got close enough to the ground for them to grab.

One moment ne was about to step for the last foothold before ne could reach the floor, the next, riv friends' hands were on riv shirt, arms, shoulders, pulling riv down and into their collective embrace.

Pandora was immediately engulfed by their arms wrapping around rix, as riv senses were assaulted by the sudden heat, pressure, and sounds.

For a few horrifying seconds, ne couldn't even move, too overwhelmed by the horrifying experience of all riv friends surrounding rix, and all of them touching rix, the pressure on riv arms and shoulders and chest making rix feel like ne was drowning.

Anywhere riv friends touched rix, it was like there was a live wire between them, but instead of electricity, it was pure sensation in its most terrible form: pain. Like a burn, but even more, and even worse -- it was sickening, it was too much.

It took Pandora a few horrifically long, terrified seconds to figure out that riv friends weren't actually trying to smother or attack rix, they were giving rix a group hug. They hadn't raced up here to murder rix.

Pandora wanted to tell them to let go, but the horrible sensations combined with the sheer horrified /bafflement/ of what was happening stole riv voice. Ne couldn't move. Ne was frozen like a deer in the headlights. Ne could barely even breathe.

Ne just couldn't believe it. /This/ was what a group hug felt like?? /This/ was the torment that everyone was always swooning over as the cutest, most heartwarming thing ever to happen?? All of the shows and movies ne had ever watched, all the books and comics, had lied to rix??? How in the world was this possible!?

All ne could do was stay frozen like a statue, unable to move to even cringe away from the invasive, painful touches. Only a few horrible seconds had passed since it began, but it felt like a lifetime.

Suddenly, May's voice suddenly called out, rising high above the din from the celebrations outside, "Hey! Hey, everyone, stop! Everyone back off! You didn't ask if you could hug him! Let go, give him some space, Calem doesn't look like he's enjoying this!"

Immediately, Pandora's other friends released rix and jumped away, exclaiming several variations of, "Sorry!" as ne stumbled from the sudden lack of support, and ne had to expend every ounce of riv restraint just to stop rixelf from spinning around and leaping right back up the rock climbing wall and out of reach.

The harness was still on rix, and beeping at rix in alarm about a "fall detected", and the heart-rate monitor was giving its own warning chirps, telling rix riv heart-rate was far higher than normal, even taking the exercise ne'd been doing into consideration. And ne could feel the proof in riv chest - riv heart was racing.

Riv friends backed away, and Pandora backed up, entirely on instinct, until riv shoulders hit one of the footholds.

Ne frantically shook out riv arms, trying to get the pins and needles that were crawling along riv skin to stop. This was unbearable. It was like they were still touching rix, ne could still feel the weight like they hadn't even let go. Ne flexed riv hands convulsively, trying to get the sensation to go away, but it didn't. In desperation, ne ripped the harness off and flung it to the floor, hoping the removal of that weight would help, and knowing ne shouldn't be trying to climb in this sort of mental state. It didn't help, but it did stop the harness from beeping.

Joy said loudly, "I'm really sorry about that, man!" as way of apology, drawing Pandora's wild gaze to him where he stood, one hand on the back of his neck, looking surprised and upset, but not as upset as Pandora thought the situation warranted. Clearly, Joy was not aware of the full effect his touch - - along with everyone's - - was still having on Pandora. Joy continued, "I was just so happy to see you were okay, I didn't even think to ask if I could hug you or not. I'm really sorry." He said, sounding sincere. The words could not possibly make up for what Pandora was suffering now.

"I'm sorry, dude!" Chad added, "We should have asked first, it won't happen again!" Pandora wished it hadn't happened in the first place. But unlike some people, ne wasn't a time traveler, ne couldn't go back in time and warn rixelf not to get within riv friends' reach without telling them not to touch rix.

The others all chimed in with equally help-less apologies and reassurances that they wouldn't hug "him" without permission again, but the whole time, Pandora was still trying to get rixelf under control. Ne couldn't appreciate the fact that they were apologizing because ne was still suffering. It /still hurt/.

Ne could still feel the pressure against riv skin, tingling like hot, painful electricity, even though there wasn't anything there. Ne was

looking at riv arm, and there was nothing there. Ne rubbed riv arms together, one across the other, hoping that would help, but it didn't do anything.

“I - I wouldn't have known to tell you no if you had asked.” Ne stammered out, feeling like ne was going to cry, completely overwhelmed and confused. This didn't make any sense. Why was this happening? “I don't know why this - feels so bad! It's not that I don't like you all - ”

“No, no, it's okay, Calem, you don't have to apologize!” May interrupted rix, and darted her way through the others so that she was standing in front of rix before she continued firmly, “It's okay to be touch-averse, you don't need to apologize, no one's going to take it personally, /right?/” There was force on the last word, and as she said it, she turned to look back at the rest of their friends, who all immediately nodded eager agreement and chorused, “Right!” and “Of course!” and a few more “Sorry!”s.

Then she turned back to Pandora, smiling sympathetically. “It helps me if I wash my hands or my arms or whatever it is after someone touches me,” She said, gesturing towards where Pandora was still rubbing riv arms together, “It helps to get rid of the weird feeling. It might help you too!” Somehow, ne knew she had to put effort in to

make her voice seem light and cheerful.

She looked around past their friends, and her eyes visibly widened as she apparently actually took in the scale of riv bedroom for the first time.

After a stunned pause, she seemed to collect herself, and turned back to rix again, forcefully, asking with her normally cheerful voice a little even more obviously strained now, “Is there a bathroom or a sink nearby? You can see if it’ll help at all.”

Pandora nodded towards the bathroom on the far side of the room, still rubbing riv arms, trying to get rid of the sensation, valiantly resisting the urge to see if scratching rixelf with riv nails would help. Ne was very tempted to claw rixelf bloody, but that probably would just make everything worse.

May threw a fist into the air like it was a huge victory, and charged away across the room, leaving their friends with no choice but to part way for her like she would run them over if they didn't.

Pandora followed her, not knowing what else to do but trusting her to know what she was talking about.

The rest of riv friends stayed where they were, and began to murmur amongst themselves, most their voices too low for Pandora to hear except in small chunks. Ne knew they were talking about riv reaction to the hug. There wasn't anything else they could possibly be talking about, not this soon after it had happened.

And as ne heard part of what was being said as ne walked away, was just now occurring to Pandora that ne hadn't told them ne was nonbinary yet, which was why they were calling rix “he”, and “Calem”. Ne would have to fix that as soon as ne no longer felt like dying from whatever the heck was happening. Right now, if ne had to choose between being misgendered again, and getting another hug, ne would rather be misgendered a million times.

Ne followed May across riv room, then led the rest of the way at a fast walk when she began to hesitate, since the door to the bathroom blended in if you didn't know what to look for, and she clearly couldn't tell where it was. It slid open upon riv approach and the lights came on automatically, and she followed rix inside.

Ne went immediately to the large sink, and shoved riv hands under the faucet, commanding, riv voice still audibly shaking, and hard to get out past the lump in riv throat, “Water on, hot, with soap.”

The sink turned on, letting loose a stream of hot, soap-infused water onto riv shaking hands. Ne immediately began to scrub at them as hard as ne could, the scented bubbles wafting the smell of a Persian silk tree's flowers into the air. Unfortunately, the sensations on riv skin were still too horrible for what was usually riv favorite scent to help.

Ne scrubbed at riv hands under the stream of hot water until the temperature almost became too hot, hoping it would make /all of it/ go away.

For good measure, ne splashed the soapy water up onto riv arms, and scrubbed them, too, barely resisting the urge to use riv nails. Riv heart was still pounding in riv chest like ne'd run a marathon. Ne was doing riv best to take slow, deep breaths, but that didn't seem to be affecting the rate of riv heart at all. Nor were the pins and needles crawling over every inch of riv skin where ne'd been touched.

And while the hot water did seem to slowly be helping with riv hands and now slightly on riv arms, none of this was helping with where ne'd been grabbed on riv chest, shoulders, or back, where the horribleness seemed to be concentrated the most strongly, because that was where ne'd been grabbed the hardest, but ne had no idea how the heck ne was supposed to do anything about that without just

getting in the shower, which...

Okay, now that ne thought of it...was an extremely tempting idea.

It still literally felt like their hands were all over rix, their arms wrapping around rix like constricting snakes. Ne could still feel the lines of pressure across riv shoulders and back. Riv skin was crawling like nothing ne'd ever felt before. If ne got in the shower, ne could use the luffa to scrub at riv skin more effectively than with riv hands, so maybe that would help. Maybe the scratchiness would replace the feeling of pressure and heat.

It would be rude to shower while riv friends were waiting, but at the moment ne didn't really care about being polite or not.

Ne glanced back at May, who'd stopped in the doorway to the bathroom, and was just standing there, currently staring up towards the ceiling with a gobsmacked expression. Pandora glanced up to see what she was looking at, but didn't see anything different from the usual. The vaulted ceiling was just the same as always.

“Hey.” Ne said, and could hear for rixelf how /not okay/ riv voice sounded. Ne sounded almost as bad as ne felt. “I'm just going to get in the shower to see if that helps, can you let everyone else know I'll

be out soon?”

May jumped, like she'd forgotten ne was there, then nodded. “Yes, I'll tell everyone.” She said. She twisted her hands together in front of her, and said, “I'm sorry again for what happened, Calem. Usually everyone's a lot better at asking before they touch someone, but with all the excitement...I guess they forgot that not everyone enjoys being touched.” To Pandora's shock, there was a heavy current of bitterness in her usually cheerful voice, which ne had never heard before. Ne thought this was the first time ne'd ever seen her upset at their friends.

But if Pandora was understanding the situation correctly, she also experienced the same sort of things ne had just felt for the first time when she was touched, so if she'd already gone through the effort of getting their friends to respect her personal space, then ne could understand why she would be so upset about them hugging rix without getting permission first.

What ne still couldn't understand was how ne'd been so successfully lied to riv entire life. The movies and shows made group hugs look like the most awesome, relaxing thing in the world. Books always described them as healing and cathartic and wonderful. The reality was that they were an absolutely horrific nightmare. Who the hell

had decided to tell this lie? Was ne really expected to believe that people /enjoyed/ hugs when they felt /like that/?

But May had called it something. What had she called it? Touch-something. Ne couldn't remember, and she'd already turned to leave the room, so ne couldn't ask unless ne wanted to chase after her.

But the sensation of hands were /still/ branded on riv skin, and ne thought the hot water and soap had helped a little for riv hands. Ne told the door to shut and lock, then began to strip out of riv clothes as quickly as possible, wanting to wash away the sensations if ne could.

Ne turned on the shower to its hottest setting with all of riv favorite scented soaps activated, grabbed the luffa and tried to once again physically scrub away the touches ne could still feel lingering. If ne closed riv eyes, it felt like ne was still surrounded, still being hugged. Ne tried to turn the water temperature up higher, only for the automatic safety controls to inform rix that it wasn't allowed. Ne sighed, and stuck riv face under the spray to let the water hit riv face instead.

At least there was one good thing about this experience.

Now ne knew to never, ever, ever accept a hug, ever, as long as ne lived.

029: “Blurry Shape at Corner of Eye”

Neopronouns: heart/hearts/heartself which follow the same rules as it/its/itself

Replace it with heart

Replace its with hearts

Replace itself with heartself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Heart is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as heart gets a fence set up around hearts yard so the puppy can go outside without heart having to walk it. Hearts uncle is going to help set up the

fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting heart use, since heart lost hearts. Heart's going to buy toys and train the puppy heartself."

029: “Blurry Shape at Corner of Eye”

It started as something heart saw out of the corner of hearts right eye, right at the very edge, where heart couldn't make out any of the details. It was just a grey blur, and almost entirely beyond hearts ability to perceive it, like a shadow.

It was mildly annoying and weird, but didn't scream “I'm dying and need to go to the emergency room immediately”, so heart ignored it.

For weeks, the grey shadow didn't change in any noticeable way, and after the first three days, heart stopped noticing it at all. It began to fade into the background, something heart only noticed if heart was already thinking about it, the way you usually didn't think about seeing your nose, even though for most people, you saw it all the time.

It became a fact of life, no more worth thinking about than the outline of hearts glasses.

But then, one day, almost a month after the first time heart saw it, heart suddenly realized that it had changed. It had moved. The shape was bigger, no longer right at the very edge of hearts vision, but still near it. Heart still couldn't see any details, but now it was starting to

block part of hearts vision.

Heart was at home when it happened, so heart ran to the bathroom and stared into the mirror with wide eyes, afraid of what heart would see.

But there was nothing. Hearts right eye looked exactly the same as it always did, and so did the left. They weren't bloodshot, and no matter how closely heart peered, heart couldn't see anything odd or different or wrong about hearts reflection. Hearts eyes were still brown, just like always.

But every time heart moved hearts eyes, the shape followed, like it was stuck to hearts eye, or like the interface in a video game, always staying centered with the camera.

Nothing hurt, so, trying not to panic too much, heart went online to look it up, hoping heart wouldn't see “yeah you're definitely dying, have fun with that” as the top result.

That was not the top result when heart typed into the search bar, “Blurry shape at corner of eye”.

No.

No, heart probably wasn't dying.

Heart probably wouldn't die for at least a couple hundred more years.

This was not a disease or an injury.

This was possession.

Heart had been chosen as a vessel for one of the wild ones, and it was going to, slowly but surely, take heart over from the inside out, until heart wasn't the one seeing the shape at the corner of heart eye, but the blurry shape slowly fading out of sight until heart was nothing but a memory.

It was too soon to tell which wild one had claimed heart. It was a grey blur, that was all heart could tell. Heart couldn't make out any features – ears, stripes, spots, horns or antlers, nothing.

If the charts were reliable, heart had probably five more months until hearts transformation was complete. By this time mid April, heart would no longer be human. Hearts entire personality would be changed and erased into something else. Heart would have walked away from hearts job and everyone who knew heart, without a

second glance backward.

All heart could do was sit there, staring at hearts computer screen, reading the words over and over again.

How could this be happening to heart? Out of all the people on Terra, why did it have to happen to heart? Why did it happen to heart? Heart wasn't anyone special, heart wasn't descended from anyone important, heart wasn't even particularly good with animals!

But none of that mattered.

Heart had been chosen as the host to one of the wild ones, and soon enough, heart wouldn't even be upset about it anymore, because the spirit's personality would have overridden hearts own, smoothing away all hearts worries and fears and anger into calm acceptance.

No matter how hard heart tried, no matter how heart stared, heart couldn't make out any distinguishing features on the blur in hearts vision.

Only time would tell.

And by the time heart could tell, heart would no longer care.

030: Boundaries are Made to be Respected, a short touch-averse horror story

Neopronouns: clo/loc/(locs)/clockself which follow the same rules as she/her/(hers)/herself

Replace she with clo

Replace her with loc

Replace hers with locs

Replace herself with clockself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Clo is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as clo gets a fence set up around loc yard so the puppy can go outside without loc having to walk it. Loc uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting loc use, since clo lost locs. Clo's going to buy toys and train the puppy clockself."

* * *

ri/riv/rivs/riverself, which will follow the same rules as
he/him/his/himself

Replace he with ri

Replace him with riv

Replace his with rivs

Replace himself with riverself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his.

He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself.”

Becomes:

"Ri is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ri gets a fence set up around rivs yard so the puppy can go outside without riv having to walk it. Rivs uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting riv use, since ri lost rivs. Ri's going to buy toys and train the puppy riverself.”

030: Boundaries are Made to be Respected, a short touch-averse Horror story.

Edie was reading on loc phone in the living room, loc legs stretched out in front of loc, loc back propped up on loc favorite pillow against one arm of the couch, when, out of the corner of loc eye, clo saw loc friend and roommate appear in the doorway that led first to the kitchen, then the hallway that led to their bedrooms and the bathroom.

Callery didn't do anything else or say anything, so Edie didn't pay riv any mind, assuming ri was looking at something on rivs own phone, and just continued reading the February 1930 edition of Astounding Stories of Super Science on loc phone, courtesy of Gutenberg.org.

The giant beetle army was advancing across the skies of Australia, and Edie was honestly shocked and horrified by the carnage that was unfolding. Clo had expected this story to be adventurous, sure, but hadn't actually expected to be thrown into the midst of a legitimate, horrifying apocalypse with people actually dying “on screen”, so to say. Why hadn't anyone adapted this to a TV show or something yet? This was horrifying. Clo couldn't look away.

So clo kept reading, and after less than a minute, clo had completely forgot loc friend was still standing in the doorway, completely absorbed as clo was by the ending half of The Beetle Horde. It almost seemed hopeless, but something had to give, right? This wasn't sustainable, so it had to end naturally soon, because nothing in nature would exist with this level of unbalance with the rest of the ecosystem--

“Hey.” Callery's voice came suddenly, deadly serious, and Edie was knocked out of loc thoughts and the book. Immediately, clo felt loc heart freeze in dread, and this time not because of the giant beetles that seemed like they were going to destroy all of humanity. No, this time it was because that was not the kind of tone of voice you used to deliver good news.

Edie lowered loc phone, and lifted loc gaze toward the doorway of the living room, turning Callery's form from a blur at the corner of loc eye into the fully detailed reality.

Leanda was standing there leaning against the doorway, wearing rivs favorite purple hoodie with rivs hands shoved into the front pocket, and rivs dark green and gold flannel pajama pants, with rivs feet bare on the carpeting. Rivs brown hair was undone from its usual ponytail, and was pushed back behind rivs ears, falling in a rippling

wave down rivs back. Rivs expression was serious, and ri was staring straight at Edie with rivs cool but disconcerting electric blue eyes.

Edie sat up, alarmed, shoved loc phone into loc pocket so it'd be out of the way, and swung loc feet onto the floor, for a moment irrationally worrying that Callery was about to announce that giant gods damned beetles were attacking Australia, before the much more logical, and likely anxieties cut in. "What's wrong?" Clo demanded, "What happened?" Had Amie died? Was someone else in the hospital? Had Callery caught Covid19? Were they both probably going to die now despite all their precautions?

To loc consternation, Callery didn't answer immediately, just looked down at the floor, rivs hands visibly fidgeting inside the giant hoodie pocket, until finally ri looked up again. "I need to ask you a favor." Ri said, still in that horribly serious tone of voice, staring directly into Edie's eyes.

Callery's contact-assisted electric blue eyes were sharp and clear, determined and intense.

Edie couldn't look away. Clo felt like clo was pinned into place like a bug under a microscope.

“What kind of favor?” Clo managed to ask, now even more alarmed than before. This was not the way loc friend normally behaved. What in the world could ri possibly want?

Again, Callery didn't answer immediately. Instead, ri strode fully into the room, around the coffee table, and then sat down right next to Edie on loc couch. Right next to loc. Literally on the cushion right next to loc.

Now clo was really afraid, and even more frozen. Why was Callery doing this? Ri knew Edie hated being this close to other people, that was why clo had a whole couch just to clockself. Clo found clockself leaning away from loc roommate, into the pillow clo'd been leaning so comfortably on just a minute before, and still, Callery didn't move away, didn't get the hint, even though Edie could see rivs eyes watching loc. Callery had to know how intensely uncomfortable Edie felt right now, how trapped ri was making clo feel, but ri wasn't doing anything to move away or apologize.

They had had many frank, in-depth discussions about Edie's boundaries and personal space bubble before they ever moved in together. Callery had sworn over and over again to respect them, not to press loc in any way. Ri had agreed that Edie's couch was Edie's alone, ri'd only use it with permission. Ri would never try to sit next

to Edie, and would not only never touch Edie without permission, but never /even/ ask Edie to let riv touch loc. The only time they would ever touch was if Edie initiated it clockself, which, Edie assured riv, would literally be never, unless there was some sort of life or death emergency.

(Clo didn't know how to perform CPR, but if Callery was ever unconscious, clo would do loc best to revive riv. And the same thing if the apartment ever caught on fire. If Callery were hurt or unconscious, Edie would try to drag riv out, or even try to carry riv if clo had to.)

So why for the love of all that was sacred was Callery doing to to loc?

Clo could barely get the words out. “What kind of favor?” Clo repeated, already sure clo knew the answer, and dreading it. There was no other favor Callery could be about to ask loc for that would involve betraying loc like this.

Clo'd thought clo could trust Callery.

“I know you're going to hate me, I'm such a horrible person for asking,” Callery began, and yeah, Edie was really, really beginning

to hate riv just for that tone of voice and the manipulative way ri was phrasing this. Callery continued, supposedly oblivious to how much ri was stressing loc out by saying this, “I know, you said you don't ever want to be touched, but, Edie, I'm really feeling touch starved right now, and I wanted to ask you if we could re-negotiate on your boundaries.”

And to think, Edie'd been having so much horrified fun just a minute or two ago. Now the horror was real.

Callery was so close Edie could smell the peppermint on rivs breath from the bag of dinner mints Edie'd gotten riv at the store as a random present, since clo knew ri loved them.

“What?” It was all Edie could think to say, because everything about this situation was horrifying, even more horrifying than the thought of giant beetles destroying the world. Re-negotiate on loc boundaries? There was no fucking way to negotiate on not being touched, except to be touched!

“I want to negotiate,” Callery repeated, and unless it was Edie's imagination, ri seemed like ri'd moved even closer. “See if we can find a middle-ground where where both our needs are being accommodated for. I'm just feeling so lonely, I really just need

someone to touch me. With the lockdowns, I can't get it from anyone else, you're my only option left.”

Edie's mind was almost blank with rage and betrayal. This was exactly the kind of thing clo'd never wanted to happen. This was the exact sort of thing clo'd set up loc extremely strict and clear boundaries to prevent.

And here Callery was, trampling all over them, and trying to make Edie feel bad about setting them up in the first place. It had seemed too good to be true when Callery had so readily agreed to respect Edie's personal space all those months ago when clo'd decided to let Callery move in with loc, and now Edie could see why it had been so easy for Callery to nod along and say the right words - - ri hadn't actually meant any of them.

It was easy to make a promise you had no intention of keeping.

Edie's heart was pounding in loc chest, and loc hands were beginning to tingle. Either loc was about to have a panic attack, or loc was really just that angry. Or both. How was clo supposed to be able to tell the difference?

“Get away from me.” Clo said, and it was a struggle to keep loc

voice even, when what clo really wanted to do was snarl. “You are way too close. Back up.”

Callery's mouth twitched, and Edie had no idea what kind of expression almost crossed rivs face.

But ri lifted riverself slightly, and backed up...but only by a few inches.

Edie didn't know what expression was on loc face when clo realized that that was as far as Callery was going to move, but Callery reacted to it by lifting rivs hands, palms forward, as though pleading with a wild animal. “Come on, Edie,” Ri said, “I'm not asking for much, and you don't know what it's like, being touch starved. I'm really suffering here, it's making my depression even worse. Can't we just, I don't know, hold hands or something? Don't look at me like that, why can't we talk about this like mature adults? You've got to learn to compromise.”

“Letting you touch me isn't a compromise!” Edie snapped. That would literally just be Callery getting everything ri wanted, and Edie losing everything clo needed. Clo shoved clocself further back into the arm of the couch, suddenly acutely aware of the fact that clo was quite literally trapped. The way the coffee table had one edge against

the wall, the only way for clo to move away from Callery if ri stayed where ri was, would be for clo to literally climb on top of the table to get away.

Callery had to be aware of this. There was no way ri couldn't be. Ri'd known what ri was doing the moment ri decided to sit down right next to Edie on loc couch, tearing straight through loc personal space like it was made of tissue paper.

“Go pet Spot!” Clo snarled, feeling too many things at once to process them all. Loc heart was still racing in loc chest, and loc head was starting to hurt, too. Clo could no longer feel loc hands. Was this anxiety? Rage? Clo couldn't tell the difference, and it didn't matter.

This conversation shouldn't be happening. This didn't have to fucking happen. How fucking dare Callery do this to loc, after making such a big show of caring about loc, after promising to respect loc boundaries.

It was so fucking simple, all ri had to do was not fucking touch loc. It was so fucking simple, didn't require any effort at all. All ri had to fucking do was actually respect Edie's boundaries, but no, no.

Callery opened rivs mouth to say something, but Edie cut riv off, too

overwhelmed to even pretend to play nice. “If you're so fucking desperate to touch someone, go pet Spot, she'd fucking love it, and there's no way in hell I'm letting you touch me. Go pet the gods damned cat!”

But Callery shook rivs head forcefully, and sighed loudly. “It's not the same as with a person.” Ri said, leaning forward like that was going to do anything to help the situation at all. “It's about the human connection.”

Edie had already been seriously contemplating the idea of punching riv in the face, and that was almost the final straw. “Well, good thing I'm not human!” Clo exclaimed, “Go find your damned human connection somewhere else! Like Robin, you know, your partner? Or did they just suddenly cease to exist?”

“The lockdown - -”

“He lives right across the parking lot! You had them over literally two days ago!”

“He went to visit their sister!” Callery slapped rivs hands down on rivs thighs, clearly starting to get frustrated with Edie's unwillingness to just give in to rivs demands. Ri clearly hadn't been

expecting a fight, ri'd just thought Edie would roll over and do what ri wanted as long as ri put on a sad face while asking. Ri huffed out a sigh, then visibly composed riverself, only to then immediately let rivs face fall back into a sad expression. "Come on," Ri said, voice lowered like that would make what ri was asking less inherently offensive, "You know I have seasonal depression, it's really kicking my ass right now. Is it really too much to ask for you to comfort your depressed friend? We can just hold hands, whatever you're comfortable with."

Whatever clo was comfortable with??

While clo was sputtering with rage at the audacity, Callery decided that ri was going to reach out towards loc shoulder with one hand.

That was it. That was Edie's limit.

The TV remote was the closest thing nearby that wasn't invaluable, sitting on the back of the sofa, so faster than clo ever thought clo'd moved before, clo snatched it up, and slammed it down on Callery's reaching hand, right across rivs knuckles.

Then clo made a flying leap over the coffee table, and miraculously managed to avoid tripping over it or slamming into the TV directly

opposite. Spinning on loc heel, clo made a split second calculation, and, ignoring the front door, swung instead through the door frame, into the kitchen, the tiled floor cold beneath loc bare feet, through the next door, then dashed down the short hallway and into loc room on the left side, turning to slam the door shut behind loc as soon as clo was inside, twisting the lock on the handle as clo did so.

It was just the simple kind of lock you turned on the doorknob, and clo had figured out how to easily open them as a kid using a penny. Literally all you had to do was fit the penny into the slot on the other side of the doorknob, and turn it, and the door would be unlocked.

All clo had in the way of real furniture in loc room was a short bookshelf that was only half filled with books, so clo immediately dragged it over across the carpet, and shoved it flat against the door.

Clo didn't know if Callery would try to get in or not. Clo didn't even know if Callery knew the trick to opening locks like this. But if Callery did manage to get in somehow past the bookshelf, Edie had plenty of spray paint to use to defend clockself, because all loc craft supplies were kept in the plastic drawers next to loc bed. Clo went over, ripped the drawer open, and snatched out the first one loc hand found - - neon yellow.

It was then that Edie realized that Spot was half-crouched right there on on loc bed, staring up at loc with wide, frightened eyes, everything about her posture screaming fear.

It was because Edie had slammed the door so hard, and maybe if Spot had heard any of their shouting. Edie was still in the midst of what was probably a panic attack, but clo did loc best to make loc voice come out soft and soothing as clo reassured almost entirely on automatic, “Hey, Spot, it's okay, it's alright, pretty kitty, you don't need to be scared, I'm not mad at you, it's alright.”

Clo wiggled loc fingers towards Spot to reassure her, and was rewarded with Spot's body language almost instantly relaxing out of her tense posture, though she was still slightly wary.

“Good girl, good kitty.” Edie reassured again, trying to calm loc own self down. Loc hands were shaking as clo pulled loc phone out of loc pocket, just to make sure loc still had it, thanking every god ever worshiped that clo'd thought to put it in loc pocket in the first place, rather than just leaving it sit on the couch. Clo didn't know what clo would have done if clo'd been trapped in here without loc phone.

It had been a calculated risk, choosing to run for loc room instead of out the front door. Clo was barefoot, and wearing shorts and a tank

top, it was forty degrees outside, and the sun hadn't even set yet, so it would only get colder. If Callery locked loc out, there would be no other options than freezing if what Callery'd said about Robin going to visit his sister was true.

There were no sounds of pursuit, no angry banging or self-pitying pleads for forgiveness from the door, so hopefully Callery was too busy crying over rivs hopefully bruised knuckles to chase loc down.

Still shaking, Edie went over to loc bed and gently sat down so clo could lean against the wall. Spot gave an almost silent 'mmow' in greeting, and immediately got to her feet to come over and curl up next to Edie's leg, rolling over onto her back to bare her soft, cream-colored belly trustingly.

Edie obliged by gently rubbing loc hand up and down Spot's belly, feeling her purr under loc hand. Most cats hated having their belly rubbed, but apparently no one had ever told Spot that, because she seemed to think she was a dog. She was by far the weirdest cat Edie had ever rescued.

Edie sighed.

Clo had set loc boundaries the way clo had for a reason.

Many people treated the idea that every person needed regular physical contact with other people as a universal fact, sacrosanct and unchallengable.

Those people hadn't met Edie, for whom physical touching from other people, and even animals if it went on long enough, caused physical pain.

Edie hadn't woken up one day and decided to punish everyone around loc by withholding physical affection, but that was sure how literally everyone clo'd ever been friends or family with acted about it.

Everyone insisted on taking the fact that physical touch literally hurt loc as a personal attack on themselves, or loc trust in them, no matter how many times clo explained that it literally didn't matter who it was, or how much clo liked them, it was all equally horrible to experience. It was literally nothing personal.

Clo had made that clear, too, to Callery when clo agreed to let riv move into loc apartment. And Callery had pretended to agree, pretended to accept it. Had nodded along and said all the nice words that Edie had been all too happy to hear.

But it had been a lie. Clo should have known better than to expect the level of compassion Callery had pretended to offer. Callery was just as selfish as everyone else Edie had ever met. Callery thought ri was owed Edie's body, owed Edie's touch, just like everyone else who had ever demanded a hug or a handshake or any other kind of physical “affection” from loc.

It literally had nothing to do with the person, and everything to do with the fact that it hurt. It felt bad.

Half the time Spot tried to sit with loc, Edie literally had to pick her up and move her somewhere else, because if Spot leaned against loc arm the way she usually wanted to, loc whole arm, all the way up to loc shoulder, would start to ache horribly, and it would stay painful for a long time afterward.

Sometimes clo was willing to put up with it to keep Spot happy, because clo was just so overjoyed to have so thoroughly gained Spot's trust in the first place, clo didn't want to do anything that would make Spot think clo didn't like her.

Because Spot was a cat, she didn't understand the concept of boundaries, she'd never agreed not to touch Edie unless loc initiated the touch first. Spot was just a cat, she was literally incapable of

breaking Edie's trust, or understanding that when Edie moved her away, it wasn't because Edie didn't like her.

The same could not be said of loc roommate.

Clo didn't know what Callery would try to do next, if ri would try to pressure Edie again, if ri would beg for forgiveness, or if ri would just pretend the whole thing hadn't happened at all, pretend ri hadn't betrayed Edie at all, and tried to guilt-trip loc into agreeing to hurt clockself.

But Edie knew one thing for sure. By this time tomorrow, clo would no longer have a roommate. Clo had managed to pay the rent on loc own for a full year before she met Callery, clo would manage it again without rivs help. Clo would never be able to trust riv ever again, not after today, not even with a million apologies and promises that it would never happen again.

Clo had already been fed that line in the past too many times to believe it now. Callery had gotten rivs chance, and instead of taking it, ri had decided to burn it to the ground.

This time tomorrow, Edie would no longer have a roommate. And that was perfectly fine with loc. Clo was happier on loc own,

anyways. Interacting with Callery every single day had been wearing on loc nerves for months. This was the final straw.

Callery could move in with Robin, if they were still willing to date riv once he found out what ri'd done. Their other roommate had moved out two weeks ago, there was no longer any point in Callery staying with Edie instead.

Some of the anger and anxiety was starting to drain away, and Edie shifted so clo could lean back against loc pillows and stretch loc legs out in front of loc, the way clo'd been lying before loc now ex-friend ex-roommate had decided to interrupt.

Clo turned loc phone back on, and selected the book again, hoping that the horrors of the beetle apocalypse would be enough to distract loc from the much worse horrors of real life.

If Callery decided to break loc door down, clo would spray-paint riv in the face when ri did that, but until that happened, clo was going to try to calm down and try to enjoy clockself.

[[Ships were found drifting in the Indian Ocean, totally destitute of crews and passengers...]]

031: Alterhuman Advancements: December 2122

Neopronouns: vey/vem/veir/(veirs)/veirself, which follow the same rules as they/them/their/(theirs)/themself

Replace they with vey

Replace them with vem

Replace their with veir

Replace theirs with veirs

Replace themselves with veirself

EX:

"They are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as they get a fence set up around their yard so the puppy can go outside without them having to walk it. Their uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting them use, since they lost theirs. They're going to buy toys and train the puppy themself."

Becomes:

"Vey are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as vey get a fence set up around veir yard so the puppy can go outside without vem having to walk it. Veir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting vem use, since vey lost veirs. Vey're going to buy toys and train the puppy veirself."

031: Alterhuman Advancements: December 2122

“Alright,” Dr. Bird said, “Now I want you to stretch your arms over your head, as high as you can reach without hurting yourself. We want to make sure the fur covers everything equally, and I need to know if the movement hurts at all. I'm going to set a thirty second timer, try to keep your arms up the whole time if you can, but stop if anything hurts at all.”

Canidae was pretty confident it wouldn't hurt, considering the poses vey'd already held while getting veir friends to take pictures of vem, not to mention vey had already checked vemself over in the bathroom mirror to look at veir new fur.

But vey still did as vey was told, stretching veir arms up high up towards the ceiling. Vey flexed veir paws, sheathing and unsheathing veir claws as vey did so, no less overjoyed at the ability now than vey had been when vey first woke up after the surgery.

(Well, once vey had actually been lucid after waking up from the surgery. The first two hours of being awake were still a bit of a confused, foggy blur from the lingering affects of the anesthetics.)

Dr. Bird paced a circle around vem, examined vem from the front,

each side, and the back, then said, when he was standing in front of vem again, smiling with his pointed teeth, “Alright, you can lower your arms again, that was perfect. Any pain at all? Any sensation of tightness of the skin? Anything feel uncomfortable at all?”

“Nope.” Canidae replied cheerfully, unwilling to stop veir tail from wagging. There was nothing fragile nearby, so there was no reason to suppress it. The new long, beautifully iridescent maroon fur on veir tail made a soft swishing noise as it went through the air.

Dr. Bird smiled at the moment. “I'm guessing this means there's no problems adjusting to your new tail?”

Canidae let veir tail wag harder as part of veir answer: “Nope!” And just to prove vey could control it, vey lifted one hand to demonstrate, closing veir fist when vey stopped veir tail from moving, and opening it again when vey let it wag again. “See? Perfect control!”

The hand signals were used in very early training for new limbs, to get you used to the idea that the thing attached to you was under your control the same way your hand was.

Dr. Bird nodded, still smiling, and the fluorescent lights in the ceiling reflected off his orange, yellow, and black scales. Dr. Bird's

species was, in his own words, “Best described simply as a dragon, so as not to arouse any fury in my very good friend, Jim Dodd, who is extremely passionate about paleontology and would become extremely irritated with me if I went around telling people I was a dinosaur when my alterations take inspiration from several dozen species of dinosaur and other ancient species, rather than just one single species of dinosaur. Trust me. You do not want to see Jim fired up about paleontology.”.

Canidae didn't know enough about actual dinosaurs to figure out which species Dr. Bird had incorporated, or exactly how he'd done so, but vey took him at his word.

Most of Dr. Bird's exposed skin (which meant his face, neck, and hands, at the moment, because he was wearing his lab coat) was covered in shiny orange-gold scales, with stripes and spots of yellow and black.

Canidae knew, from seeing him on the fourth edition of *Alterhuman Advancements*, where Dr. Bird had taken a selfie underwater with some sharks, that he had plates of black scales on his torso and belly, which extended all the way from the point of his chin down to the tip of his tail.

His tail was almost as long as his torso, and similar to an alligator's, but with a fin running down the top center of it that he could lower and raise at will, helping him swim more efficiently. His face was a long, sturdy, lizard-like muzzle, with small ridges over his nostrils, and larger ridges around his eyes. His face was the same orange-gold as most of the rest of him, except for right around his eyes, where it was black, with four thin lines tracing to the end of his nose, almost like a zebra, or a skink.

He had kept his hair, and modified the left half of it so that it grew out bright yellow to match the spots on his scales, while the right half was still its natural black. His eyes, complete with reptilian slitted pupils, were bright gold, and always friendly.

His smile, too, was already ready and friendly, even now that it was filled with sharp teeth. It was part of the reason Canidae had chosen Dr. Bird to perform veir alterations, aside from the fact that he was probably /the/ top alterist in the world.

It had taken three months of waiting to get veir appointment for the alteration surgery, and the wait had been worth it. It had taken that long for Dr. Bird to design and create the bases and codes for Canidae's ears, tail, fur, and, most complicatedly, veir new muzzle, complete with functioning nose, tongue, taste buds, teeth, and all the

nerve ending and muscles and too many complicated things for Canidae to remember the names of.

Veir vision had also been improved, so vey would no longer have to wear glasses just to see anything more than two inches away from veir nose. Well, veir old nose – the new one was much longer, so without the eye adjustments vey probably wouldn't even be able to focus on veir own nose, let alone see anything further away than it.

Vey were still getting used to the fact that vey could see things in detail the moment vey woke up in the morning, and didn't have to worry about taking veir glasses off at night or before they got in the shower. And now vey could go swimming and still be able to see! Vey would finally be able to go to the beach and actually get in the water and still be able to see veir friends and the people on the shore!

And the smells! Not only did veir new nose reduce veir oversensitivity to strong chemical smells by actively filtering them before they could cause pain, it warned vem when dangerous fumes were in the air even if they weren't something vey would have been able to notice before. It would also tell vem when food was starting to go bad, and when it was safe to eat, so vey wouldn't have to stress about leftovers that had been in the fridge for a few days.

But veir favorite thing was, by no contest at all, the fur. Vey could change the colors and patterns anytime vey wanted, and the default had been picked out inch by inch while vey'd been waiting for the final day of veir appointment.

Most of veir fur was deep red, real red, not the orange you saw on actual foxes. That was the base color. Then, starting on the top of veir muzzle, tracing down veir throat and to veir belly, was pastel blue and green, fading in and out in a gentle gradient. Around veir eyes, now pastel green with a circle of white stars around the pupil, was a mask of pastel orange that faded to yellow, and traced its way up to their ears before fading to red again.

The longer hair vey'd kept on the top of veir head was undercut, and set so it would always be parted to one side. It was stark white, with a few streaks of cyan just for fun.

They hadn't grown in just yet, but soon, vey would have the first stages of grown on veir antlers, and vey would be able to customize their shape and final size as they grew in.

Vey could have just gotten attachable antlers like with veir ears, but vey wanted the experience of growing them veirself, and having Dr. Bird be the one to create them was an opportunity too good to pass

up. Dr. Bird had been the alterist to design and create Altera's wings, the first functioning wings of any cyberfurry, and had helped invent the alteration technology in the first place.

Canidae's antlers would be another first for the technology, and vey couldn't wait to see how they turned out. Even if they never got to full size, it would still be a technological breakthrough, and Canidae could always have them removed and switched out for a moddable base vey could attach any antlers or horns they wanted to.

Technically, vey could have stopped wagging veir tail any time vey wanted, but over the course of the rest of the appointment - - Dr. Bird running them through a checklist of tests to make sure everything was working the way it should, with a break every hour and lunch provided at no cost, where vey got to hear stories about the adventures Dr. Bird and his friend Jim had gone on together - - veir tail kept wagging the whole time.

This had definitely been worth the wait.

032: Real Heroes Kill Cops

Neopronouns: su/[na]/uvu/lo/(ka)/zeda.

Na replaces contractions with "su", so rather than saying "Su's a superhero" they way you'd say "He's a superhero", you say "Na a superhero".

Ka is used the same way "hers" is, so if you'd use "hers" like, "The house is hers" you'd say "The house is ka"

Replace he with su

Replace contractions of su with na

Replace him with vem

Replace his with veir

Replace hers with ka

Replace himself with zeda

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Su is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as su gets a fence set up around lo yard so the puppy can go outside without uvu having to walk it. Lo uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting uvu use, since su lost ka. Na going to buy toys and train the puppy zeda."

032: Real Heroes Kill Cops

* * *

Rebecca Washington, alias Constitution.

* * *

Constitution smirked, one foot planted firmly on one of the thug's backs, the other on another one's hand, and crossed her arms over her chest as she tilted her head to the side, examining the third one still in front of her, lo back pressed to the wall, with nowhere to escape.

She didn't know the ones she was currently standing on, so they were either new in town, or at least newly stupid, if they thought they could get away with this crap under her watch.

But this cowering worm? Oh, she knew uvu.

“Theria,” She pretended to sigh reprovngly, “how many times do we have to go over this? Did you really forget the last lesson I taught you already? ”

She spun her baton casually through her fingers, and saw Theria tense further into the wall in a very satisfying way. So su hadn't forgotten, then, su was just being purposefully irritating to ruin Constitution's night.

Theria didn't answer, just glared in silence, even though Constitution could see su was trembling, despite the warm night.

“What, no reply?” She teased, “Is this any way to treat an old friend?”

Theria's only response was to bare lo teeth, like su really was the wild animal lo name claimed su was.

Constitution rolled her eyes. Both Theria's friends were unconscious, and still su was silent as the grave. No matter how many times Constitution hit uvu, su never answered any of her questions.

It was infuriating. Usually, Constitution always got the answers she wanted in any interrogation of criminals. But not with Theria.

Lo cronies always claimed su was nonverbal and couldn't speak, but Constitution refused to accept it, and was determined to prove them all wrong.

She spun the baton over her head, and stepped forward onto the cracked pavement. Theria's eyes never left hers, still glaring in silent defiance.

“Well,” She mused, already enjoying what was about to happen for the umpteenth time, “I guess we just have to go over it again, don't we? Really, I mean, what did you think was going to happen? Setting a bomb? Really? Did you really think you could get away with trying to blow up the detention facility?”

She hefted the baton in one hand, preparing to strike the [adjective?] over the head- -

- -And had only a moment to realize with confusion that Theria's bared teeth had transformed from a snarl, into something that looked like a smile.

* * *

Theria

* * *

The moment Constitution was no longer touching Vanny or Eight, the moment both her feet were on the broken road, Theria let go of

the wall of force na been holding back since su heard Constitution's theme music approaching from the air.

Theria's purple energy exploded into the air before the supercop had any time to react, and engulfed her in a ring of power that shot up from the ground and into the sky like a beacon, illuminating the storm clouds in all directions and burning all the nearby colors into shades of purple and magenta.

At the same time, Theria could feel the almost familiar wings sprouting from lo back, and the long, draconic muzzle extending forward from lo face, filled to the brim with razor sharp teeth. Horns stretched out from the top of lo head, and su could feel the powerful tail whipping through the air behind uvu, the heavy weight at the end of it a spiked club that was reassuring in its power. Purple flames wreathed lo arms and legs like a living cloak.

Su could feel the circle of power from the trap na set eating away at Constitution's form, the energy rushing through uvu from that song echoing at the edge of lo mind in an almost endless river, all of it surging straight into the circle, trying to overcome Constitution's unexpected resistance, all of it driven by pure instinct.

This was the first time Theria had used lo powers like this against a

real living thing, and su was dismayed to see that it was more difficult to destroy something that was alive than it had been to destroy the stack of books na tried it on first.

So maybe lo powers were less like anti-matter and more like...

Well... okay, su didn't know what to compare it to, but it wasn't as efficient as na hoped it would be from how dramatic it looked, and how easily the shitty books su regretted buying had been disintegrated.

The magical purple energy that surged and sparked like electricity certainly /looked/ like it could kill someone in two seconds flat, but apparently not.

Finally, Theria felt the resistance give way, and /felt/ the energy completely consume Constitution, wiping her out of existence, with not even any dust to leave behind.

And then there was a strange sensation, like a spark of static electricity, only inside Theria's mind instead of on lo hand.

And just as instinctively as su knew how to use the purple energy, Theria now knew, somehow, that su had absorbed an ability from

Constitution. Not from her amour or her flash baton, but from /her/.

/A healing ability./ The instinct seemed to whisper in Theria's mind.

Su let the beam of energy dissipate, and the darkness of the night swept back in, leaving uvu squinting into the dark for a few seconds before lo eyes began to adjust, allowing uvu to see Vanny and Eight's still unconscious forms lying on the cracked pavement.

Constitution had hit them both with her accursed baton, but she hadn't said what setting it was on, and it was too dark to see if they were still breathing. Maybe this was the final strike. Theria lunged forward, reaching for Eight's neck.

Ler skin was still warm, and it took a few frantic seconds to find a pulse. Vanny was the same.

Theria was just about to try out lo new healing ability to try and revive them when a familiar sound reached lo ears, sending a spike of dread and anger through lo heart.

Wings of Justice's theme.

He'd probably been alerted by the flare of light, or maybe Constitutions armour had sent out a distress signal. Either way, he'd

be looking for a fight, like always. And if he knew Theria'd killed Constitution, all bets were off.

Trying to revive Vanny and Eight now would just put them in more danger, especially if su failed. Veris would be on her way any minute now, with whatever reinforcements she'd been able to find.

Theria needed to take the fight to Wings of Justice. The music was approaching rapidly. There wasn't even any time to drag lo friends to safety.

Su stood, and backed away from lo friends. Then su stretched out the wings on lo back, extending them to their fullest for the first time, guided only by the strange new instinct that seemed like a whisper in lo ear, guiding lo movements.

Su crouched, lifted lo wings, then leapt while shoving downward against the air.

Su shot into the sky, with shocking speed and ease, and somehow, su knew exactly what su needed to do. Su spun towards the sound of Wings of Justice's approach, and saw him shooting closer like a comet with a trail of red, white, and blue from his jetpack and wings.

Killing Constitution hadn't been enough to cool the rage that seemed to have taken up permanent residence inside Theria's veins. The flames surrounding uvu flared even higher, and su let out a primal shriek of wrath that rang out through the sky like a physical force.

Wings of Justice faltered in the air, and Theria shot forward as fast as su could, determined that by the time the sun rose, the shadow of injustice would never fall over anyone ever again.

Not if su had anything to say about it.

033: Customer Service

Neopronouns: xiy/rik/ix/sirav which follow the same rules as he/him

Replace he with xiy

Replace him with rik

Replace his with ix

Replace himself with sirav

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Xiy is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as xiy gets a fence set up around ix yard so the puppy can go outside without rik having

to walk it. Ix uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting rik use, since xiy lost ix. Xiy's going to buy toys and train the puppy sirav."

033: Customer Service

“Excuse me, /what/?”

Cloud knew better than to expect anything except this sort of reaction. Tiffany wouldn't be Tiffany if she reacted any other way.

Xiy resisted the urge to sigh, and repeated with irritation that was difficult to conceal, “I don't hate it. Why should I?”

Tiffany stared at rik, her blue eyes wide and shocked.

Her red mask with strawberries on it thankfully hid her mouth from view, because xiy had flat out refused to even touch any of her items until she put her mask on properly, but xiy could only assume it was dropped open to match the rest of her scandalized expression. “But--” She seemed at a loss for words. Her white skin turned slightly red as she got worked up. “But it's a nightmare! You're turning into a monster!”

Yeah, this was why Cloud tried to avoid Tiffany whenever xiy could. Unfortunately xiy couldn't do anything about it this time. Tiffany had probably sought rik out, knowing xiy couldn't escape this time.

Xiy said, slowly and clearly so there was no chance of Tiffany- -or anyone else listening in on the conversation- - pretending not to understand, “No, I'm not turning into a monster. There is nothing monstrous or nightmarish about it, it's still literally just me, plus some fur and claws and stuff. I'm still me when I change form.”

“But Patricia told me you turned feral!” Tiffany exclaimed, “She said you went completely out of control, and slaughtered a poor, sweet, innocent deer! No one in their right mind would do such a terrible thing!” She put her hand over her heart to emphasize her distress. “I know you're a good person, Jordan, you wouldn't have done that if you were in control of yourself!”

Xiy resisted the urge to growl. As it was, xiy bared ix fangs behind ix mask, and managed to say /almost/ evenly, “My name is Cloud, Tiffany, not Jordan. It's right here on my name tag so you don't forget again.” Xiy tapped ix free hand on the nametag pinned to the front of ix uniform shirt.

Tiffany widened her eyes comically, like this was brand new information, like she hadn't already been told more than a dozen times. She stared down at ix nametag, then clapped a hand to her forehead. “Oh, silly me!” She exclaimed, throwing her other hand into the air and waving it in a circle, “I forgot again!”

At the back of the line, which was now over seven people long, someone called out, “Hurry the hell up, Tiffany, some of us have got places to be!”

Tiffany turned to glare, even more scandalized than before. “How rude!”

“No,” the same voice called back, “What's rude is making all of us waste time standing around here. I got in this line specifically because I know Cloud's the fastest cashier here, but thanks to you I've been standing here for ten minutes now! Go the hell home already! You already paid and all your shit's bagged, and xiy literally put it in your damn cart for you to give you the hint to get out of the line, now will you please take the damn receipt and go home already? Or at least get out of the damn way so the next person can check out? My leg is killing me and I didn't bring my rollator because I didn't think I'd be standing around this long.”

Glad for the mask that stopped ix grin at the reinforcements from being visible to Tiffany, xiy pressed the receipt xiy held forward even further, so that Tiffany couldn't help but have her attention drawn back to it.

Tiffany blinked, then finally took the receipt. She reached up towards her face with her other hand as though to instinctively pull her mask down, then aborted the motion abruptly.

Seemingly getting over her confusion, she shoved the receipt into her purse in the top of her cart, and glared poisonously back at the rest of the line, which was now nine people long.

“Well forgive me for wanting to have a friendly chat!” She snapped.

Cloud resisted the urge to sigh. This was not what anyone would call a friendly chat. A friendly chat was actually being nice to your cashier while they rang up your purchase, and then getting out of the way once you were done paying. Cloud was not here to make friends, xiy was here to do ix job, which xiy couldn't do if obnoxious customers like Tiffany insisted upon holding up the entire line by refusing to get out of it when they were done.

Especially if, like Tiffany, they insisted upon deadnaming and misgendering you while they wasted everyone elShe's time. Or being obnoxious about you becoming the town's first confirmed case of lycanthropy.

Despite the fact that everyone who watched the local news or talked to literally anyone who knew rik knew that Cloud wouldn't be dangerous or out of control when xiy transformed, Tiffany and her clique of other obnoxious friends still wanted to act like they had no idea how therianthropy worked, even though it had existed now for at least half their lifetime. There wasn't any excuse to not know how it worked in the year 2069.

Thankfully for everyone, Tiffany decided not to argue anymore or cause an even bigger scene. She just huffed, turned haughtily away from the line, which was now stretching back into the aisle, and left without another word.

The voice from the middle of the line from before called out, “Well it's about time!”

Cloud resisted the urge to laugh out loud, and settled for the next customer's items on the conveyor belt.

To ix surprise, though, the man - -whose hair seemed to cycle through every color of the rainbow every few weeks, this time bright, fire-engine red- -held out one hand to block rik and said, “Actually, just one moment, Xr. Cloud, if it's okay with you, I think I'd like to let Charley go before me, just so it can get off that leg of

its. I already cleared it with everyone else behind me, so, as long as you don't mind?"

He looked at Cloud, and xiy nodded quickly, surprised but happy. "Yes, that's fine!" Xiy said, turning the belt off so it wouldn't move forward by itself, "I don't mind at all." Xiy used the flat of ix arm to gently shove the groceries on the belt backwards a little, then place the next divider in front so that there would be space in front of them for Charley's stuff.

"Charley, come on forward so you can get off that leg." The man said, and there was a short shuffle as Cloud watched everyone else behind him scooting to the side to let the person past. This was the person who'd told Tiffany off for taking so long.

It put up a slight protest as it was herded forward, saying embarrassedly, "Well, no, no, I'm fine waiting my turn, you've been here longer than I am! Really, I'm fine, you don't need to wait on my account- -"

The man with the dyed hair just smiled and shook his head, and some of the other people in the line made various comments along the lines of, "No, please, I insist!" or "Go ahead of me, I'm in no rush!"

Finally the person was in front of Cloud, holding its small collection of groceries in one arm, the other holding its white cane.

It was wearing a blue mask with white checkers, and its grey and blue eyes (which up until now had been the only way for Cloud to remember ever meeting it before now, since xiy always forgot everyone's names) were staring slightly off to the side of where Cloud was.

“I really am sorry for cutting ahead,” It said, setting its few items down carefully on the belt- - A box of sandwich crackers, cupcakes, a box of water flavoring packets, a loaf of bread, and a bag of grapes - - “And I hope I didn't cause you any trouble, telling off Tiffany like that.”

Cloud had to resist the urge to laugh again, but this time in shock. “No, no,” Xiy assured hastily, “Don't apologize, you said what I wanted to. Thank /you/. And it's no problem at all! Do you want your groceries all in one bag again?”

Cloud rarely remembered customer's names, but xiy remembered what they looked like after enough times of seeing them, and Charley always wanted as few bags as possible, since it walked to the store.

“Yes, yes that's fine. Thank you again, Cloud.” It said, moving over to the payment reader and holding its wrist up to the screen. The reader chirped, and began reading off the name and price of the items as Cloud scanned them.

There was just its bag of grapes and a loaf of bread left to scan, so Cloud scanned the bread first, then put the grapes on the scale, oh so casually setting it “crookedly” while pretending not to notice, so that most of the weight wasn't registered.

If Charley or the man with the dyed hair noticed anything odd about how cheaply the grapes rang up, neither of them said anything.

Cloud smiled behind ix mask.

“Your total's \$102.71” Xiy said automatically, a moment before Charley's reader repeated the exact same thing in a high, cheerful electronic voice.

“Thank you.” Charley said. The reader chirped again, and announced, “Payment transferred. Have a nice day.”

“Receipt in the bag?” Cloud asked, just to make sure.

“Yes please.” Charley replied.

Cloud stuck the receipt in the bag, then pulled the bag off the wheel and held it out to Charley, saying, “Here's your bag.” and making sure to let the plastic crinkle so Charley would be able to hear where it was.

Charley accepted the bag, and though its mouth was hidden, Cloud was pretty sure from the way its eyebrows were crinkling that it was smiling.

“Have a nice day, and try to stay cool out there!” Xiy said cheerfully.

“Thank you, and you too!” Charley turned to look over its shoulder one more time at the long line, and said, “Thank you again, Michael, thank you, everyone.”

There was a chorus of “you're welcome”s and “it's no problem”s and “have a nice day”s and one “I'll see you at book club on Thursday!” from all along the line.

Charley left, and now that it was his turn, the man with the bright red hair sat a five hundred dollar bill down on the counter while Cloud reached for the first of his items.

“I'll be paying with my reader,” He said, “This is for you. I don't want this to sound weird, and maybe I'm being impudent, but is there any chance I could pay you to bite me on the next full moon?”

This was just going to be the new normal, apparently. “I can't accept that while I'm on the clock.” Xiy said, making sure to stress the words 'on the clock' for emphasis, “But leave me your Hawire name and we can discuss it later. There is a waiting list, I've already promised a bite to eighteen people ahead you, so I probably won't be able to bite you until December. Three's the maximum number I can transmit it to per full moon so far.”

He literally clapped his hands in excitement, then put the five hundred dollar bill back in his wallet. “That's fine by me!” He said cheerfully, “I've been waiting my whole life, I can handle waiting six more months! You're the best, Cloud!”

The rest of the line went just as smoothly, with all the customers being nice and patient and several of them commenting that they didn't mind waiting at all, because they knew xiy was the best cashier ever to work there. “Tell that to my boss.” Xiy replied every time, and was met with variations upon, “Oh, I will, believe me.”

The irritation with Tiffany aside, it had been a good day.

When xiy got off from work later that night, it was to three dozen notifications on ix phone, informing rik that almost forty people had given rik a tip for ix excellent customer service, adding up to three and a half thousand dollars total.

That was more than twice ix official wages for the day.

Company policy banned and harshly punished accepting tips from customers, but that didn't stop the customers who were determined enough from tipping rik through ix Hawire account.

What the company didn't know about, they couldn't punish you for.

And the full moon was next week, so there was something to look forward to.

034: Executive Execution

Neopronouns: hea/ler/(lers)/lerself which follow the same rules as she/her/(hers)/herself

Replace she with hea

Replace her with ler

Replace hers with lers

Replace herself with lerself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Hea is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as hea gets a fence set up around ler yard so the puppy can go outside without ler having to walk it. Ler uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting ler use, since hea lost lers. Hea's going to buy toys and train the puppy lerself."

034: Executive Execution

Nat paused as hea was about to click to ler email, distracted momentarily by the larger-than-usual text on the homepage where the news was displayed. Hea'd just woken up, and was trying to get in the habit of actually checking ler emails everyday so hea could keep up with everything properly.

Normally hea didn't bother to read the news until after hea ate breakfast. But this time hea couldn't help it, the font was so big it drew ler gaze automatically.

When ler brain caught up with the words hea was reading, hea blinked, taken aback completely, and glanced down at the date in the bottom corner of the screen, just to make sure hea hadn't somehow had a really convincing dream that it was December only to wake up and find that it was, in fact, April 1st.

But no, the date read December 18th, just like hea'd thought it should. It was not April Fools Day.

So why in the absolute hell was Hawire News displaying “President Madsen Bitten By Werewolf, Slain by His Own Secret Service” as her headline??? The timestamp was from only two minutes ago, so Sovie had just published it.

Hea clicked the link under the headline, wondering if someone was trying to be funny or advertising for a satirical play, or something. If that's what it was, hea was going to have to send in a complaint to Sovie. Stuff like this could really scare people for no good reason.

But as hea read through the article, her confidence that it was a joke began to melt. But this couldn't be real, right?

It wasn't like Sovie to lie like this, but anything was possible...but this couldn't be true. It was just too absurd.

Hea closed the article, and opened the messaging tab, then sent to Sovie:

::Hey, what's up with the article about Madsen being bitten by a werewolf? Is there some joke here I'm missing? I don't get it.::

The infobox next to her icon showed he was online, and normally, he was really quick about replying.

But this time Nat had to wait, first a minute, then two, then three, and ten minutes later there was still no response, though by that time hea'd already opened another tab to search the rest of the internet to see if hea could get any confirmation or denial.

And to her shock, every other website she found talking about it was saying the same thing – Madsen was dead. He'd transformed into a werewolf, then was killed by White House security when they saw him, not realizing who he was while he was transformed. The werewolf fell to the ground with the first shot to his chest, then vanished when security continued to fire. None of his blood stayed behind, which was probably a relief for the cleaning crews.

A check of the bullets missing from the guns used to kill him showed he'd been shot more than twenty times in the chest and ten times in the head. Security hadn't wanted to take any chances with him recovering if he had any special healing abilities.

When Madsen was initially found dead in a pool of blood in his bedroom, the immediate assumption was that he'd been killed by the werewolf, who had clearly been some sort of criminal mastermind, since he'd managed to not only get into the White House without being detected, but had murdered the President without alerting anyone. The secret service who had shot him were given the highest honors for stopping any further rampage. It was determined that there was nothing they could have done to protect the President and they weren't at fault for his death, since the werewolf had clearly been so unstoppably clever, far beyond anything they should have been expected to predict.

Then the autopsy report came back.

And revealed that President Madsen been not been mauled to death. He'd been shot with the very same bullets that had been used to kill the werewolf. He'd transformed into a new lineage of werewolf, and had promptly been shot to death by his own secret service before he could even get a word out.

All of this had happened while Nat was asleep.

Hea sat there, staring at the screen of her computer, stunned by every word hea read.

The whole country was in lockdown, and a state of emergency had been declared. Werewolves and other therianthropes were being arrested en masse, with media screaming about a conspiracy to trick the secret service into assassinating the President of the United States.

The government was trying to pin the blame on therianthropes who'd probably never even been to DC instead of reconsidering any of their own basic security measures.

No one even knew how Madsen had become a werewolf in the first place yet.

Nat still hadn't gotten a response back from Sovie, probably because he was busy rushing to archive every article he found.

Numb with shock, Nat sent another message into the empty chat: ::NVM.::

Then hea stood, double checked the temperature on her phone, and started preparations to go out and stay out for a while.

First hea grabbed her winter boots from the floor, and her long socks, and put them on as fast as hea could, along with her bandana-style facemask. Hea was wearing her fluffy pajama pants, which would be warm enough for now. But just in case it snowed, hea pulled the rain pants out of the storage cabinet into her backpack. Then hea threw on her sweatshirt, and put her raincoat on over top of that, then her neon vest over top of that.

Hea used the four pieces of velcroed ribbon hea'd cut to size a while ago to secure the bottom hems of her pajama pants so they wouldn't flap around and get caught in the chain of her bicycle. That had happened exactly one time, and hea was going to make sure it never

happened again.

Hea had to waste a minute checking all her pockets for her winter gloves, and finally found them rolled up inside her winter hat, next to her safety goggles. Hea put on the goggles first to protect her eyes from the cold and the wind, then the baseball cap to protect them from the sun, then the winter hat over that to keep her ears warm, then, grabbed her dufflebag and shoved it into her backpack with the rain pants and some granola bars, and then finally hea was ready to go.

Hea turned off the lights, and clomped hurriedly out the door with her normal shoes shoved into a plastic bag in the backpack, carried at her side.

If therianthropes were being arrested, that meant there was going to be a surge of refugees at their borders, and hea needed to be there to help direct people inside and keep everyone calm. It was going to get below freezing in the next two days, and they needed to make sure everyone was accounted for so no one would be left without shelter, or crammed into too small of a space.

Nat's apartment building was almost filled to maximum comfort level, but it could probably house another two hundred people before

it hit the maximum safety level.

One of the older apartment buildings had just gotten its repairs finished yesterday, so if worst came to worst, they would at least be able to shelter people in there until more permanent arrangements could be made. But all the furniture had been taken out for the repairs and cleaning, so unless they managed to get it all back in there before anyone needed it, it wouldn't be comfortable. People would have nowhere to sit, and they'd have to sleep on the floor.

The heat in the building worked, but that wouldn't make sleeping on the hard floor any less miserable.

Hea got to the lobby of the apartment, and saw Mb. Spooner at the desk. Fe looked up when Nat came leaping down the stairs, and they both called out at the same time, “Did you hear?”

Mb. Spooner replied, “Yes!” right as Nat said, “I'm heading to the limits to help out!”

Mb. Spooner called after her as hea headed towards the door, “I checked the lists, we can house at least a hundred more people permanently if they don't mind a bit of a squeeze, and almost three hundred if it's just for the night if they're okay sleeping on couches

or the floor. Tell Granton I'll send her the updated lists for this block as soon as I've compiled them. Stay warm!"

Then Nat was out the door, and the bitterly cold wind was actually almost a relief from how warm hea'd gotten wearing her winter gear inside the heated building.

Hea went over to the shed against the wall and got out her bike, making sure the bag of extra hats and gloves was still in the back basket, then shoved the backpack in on top, and crossed one of the ropes over it so there was no chance of anything flying out.

Hea hadn't had time to eat breakfast, but someone with a car would be bringing hot food to the border at some point, so hea wasn't worried about going hungry.

It was only as hea started the ride to the edge of the city that hea realized that in all the franticity, hea hadn't even had time to really consider the fact that Madsen was dead. The President of the United States had gotten killed by his own secret service.

Madsen was dead. And he'd gotten killed /by his own secret service/.

This was probably the funniest national disaster ever to happen. This was probably going to be the most important day Nat ever lived through in her whole life. And there wasn't even time to celebrate.

As soon as the emergency was over, they definitely needed to throw a party, make it a city-wide holiday.

035: A Friendly Encounter in the Woods

Neopronouns: fe/ir which follow the same rules as

Replace he, him, and himself with fe

Replace his with ir

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Fe is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as fe gets a fence set up around ir yard so the puppy can go outside without fe having to walk it. Ir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since fe has a set of power tools he's letting fe use, since fe lost ir. Fe's going to buy toys and train the puppy fe."

035: A Friendly Encounter in the Woods

Nri opened ir eyes when fe became aware of the suddenly noticeable sound of crunching leaves. The sound broke through ir vague dreams and brought fe back to the real world.

The sight that met ir eyes was confusing, and fe lifted ir head, curious.

That was the strangest wolf fe'd ever seen, standing across the clearing from fe, staring over wagging its yellow tail slightly, its ears forward with friendly interest.

Nri sat up, and its tail wagged harder. “Hello!” It called, “Hello!”

“Hello.” Nri replied, and the strange wolf trotted forward, tail still wagging madly, friendliness in every line of its body.

Normally, fe would be wary of a strange wolf, but this one was so friendly, fe couldn't muster up the energy to be afraid. It had been a while since fe'd last had anyone to play with, and despite its strangeness, this strange wolf more than made up for it with its friendliness.

It had stopped a few bodylengths away, still wagging its tail, quivering with clearly repressed excitement.

Nri closed the distance after a moment of hesitation, and they spent the next few minutes sniffing noses and greeting each other, with the stranger wolf getting increasingly more excited, until it was jumping and running around the trees around Nri, bouncing and playbowing like fe had only ever seen in ir days as a puppy with ir siblings.

A few times fe thought it was going to tacke fe, but every time it jumped to the side instead, until finally it had fully gained ir trust, no longer wary at all.

Its enthusiasm was infectious, and Nri happily gave in to the temptation to unleash ir inner puppy, and fe found fe chasing and running after the strange wolf like they'd known each other their whole lives.

Eventually, they ran out of energy, and curled up together to go back to the nap it'd woken fe from in the first place.

Fe rested ir chin on the back of its neck, pondering the curious coincidence that it also had a strange piece of hide around its neck, though its was thinner than ir, and smelled different from anything fe had ever smelled before.

Fe would have to ask it if it had also been attacked by a dragon when their nap was over.

036: Into Thin Air

Neopronouns: they/them/their/themselves (or themselves or theirself)

"They are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as they get a fence set up around their yard so the puppy can go outside without them having to walk it. Their uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting them use, since they lost theirs. They're going to buy toys and train the puppy themselves."

036: Into Thin Air

Mattil stared hard at the picture before them, struggling to pick out any identifiable features on the small, grainy photo.

But it was no use - - no amount of staring would make the picture quality any better, or make the person in the photo any more recognizable.

They finally had to give up, and lowered the picture away from their face. "I'm sorry," Mattil said, "I can't tell."

They could explain, "It could be him, but it could also be literally any other felin with grey wings and a blue crest, assuming he hadn't changed his presentation in the five years he'd been missing" but that didn't seem worth stating explicitly. Blue wings and a grey crest was the most popular combination for felin. There was no way to tell for sure if it was Jerris from just this single, (frankly crappy) photo taken from far away from the back. And they didn't feel like getting their hopes up for no reason.

You couldn't even see either of the felin's arms or even the shoulders, so there was no way to tell if they had both hands, or had a prosthetic.

It was actually starting to make Mattil mad, actually, the fact that such a terrible picture was what they'd been called all the way over here for.

Like, what, didn't they have any decent cameras over in Seorei? What was the point of a security camera if you couldn't actually see anything in it or recognize anyone?

The agent in charge, whose names Mattil had forgotten, shuffled xir yellow and brown wings with impatience, and sighed loudly.

Well, that was just rude. It's not like xi'd had to travel all the way to this stupid building just to be asked to stare at a grainy picture that could be literally anybody. Xi worked here. Xi as probably getting paid a lot to be annoyed. Mattil wasn't. They probably wouldn't even get any compensation for traveling here.

And why was the BAA even getting their hopes up like this? Jerris had disappeared five years ago. When the BAA had called Mattil, they'd made it sound like they'd actually found him, that he was alive.

But no, Mattil had to come all this way, in the cold, and for nothing! A stupid, crappy photograph that could be anyone, with nothing in

particular to point to it being him except...

Except what? Mattil didn't even know! They'd just walked in, and the agent had handed them the photo, and asked if it was Jarris.

“Gu Mattil- -” The agent started to say, but Mattil cut him off.

“It's /Som/ Mattil.” They corrected sharply, more sharply than they normally would, but this was more than a little absurd. “I'm an ancer.” For emphasis, they gestured to their clothes and makeup - - black and bright green and blue, with yellow highlights.

It was cold out, and barely warmer in the building than it was outside (the only difference was that there was no windchill, which at least was a positive) so they were wearing their long thick winter pants, waterproof boots, their winter coat, heavy gloves, their hat, and their hood.

Their partially extended wings had sleeves of their own, with green and blue tassels on the closed ends. All of their clothes were covered in repeating diamond formations of black, blue, green, and yellow.

It was the most brazen display of ancerity they could pull off without feathers of their own, and for this agent to just ignore that and

instead speak to them like they were a child...

That was infuriating. What kid went around this brightly dressed?

The agent looked them up and down, xir eyes resting for a moment on their wings. Then xi met their gaze again, and said, not even bothering to hide the patronization dripping from xir voice, “Of course you are.”

Mattil saw red, and had to resist the urge to launch themselves across the table and spend the rest of their life in prison for assaulting an agent of the BAA.

Instead they shoved themselves out of their chair, and slammed the crappy picture they still held onto the table. “I'm going home now, if you don't have any more grainy pictures to shove in my face.” They said sarcastically.

They didn't wait for a response, they just turned and headed towards the door.

The agent only spoke when Mattil's hand was already pulled the door open, calling out shortly, “We'll call you in again if we have any further questions.”

Trying to get the last word in, and make it seem like them leaving was xir choice. Pathetic.

“Get a better krakking camera next time.” Mattil threw scornfully over their shoulder in response.

They stormed out into the short hallway, then out the door and into the wind-chilled cold.

Now they had to get all the way home without freezing to death, and for no good fucking reason, either.

Jerris had disappeared just a mile outside the city while flying over the forest. Why in all the levels of hell would he suddenly reappear on the other side of the world?

And why the hell was the BAA so interested in a missing-presumed-dead naturalist?

The more Mattil thought about it, on that long, arduous hike home, the more uneasy they became at the possibilities their mind was conjuring up to explain the connections.

Was Jerris really alive? Had he really disappeared at all? Why was the BAA so interested in him?

Just what, if anything, had their brother been up to before he disappeared to attract this kind of attention?

Had his disappearance really been an accident?

037: Don't Stop to Pay

Neopronouns: ve/vei/veir/veirself, which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this example.

Replace he with ve (vee)

Replace him with vei (vey)

Replace his with veir (veer)

Replace himself with veirself (veer-self)

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ve is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ve gets a fence set up around veir yard so the puppy can go outside without vei having to walk it. Veir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting vei use, since ve lost veir. Ve's going to buy toys and train the puppy veirself."

037: Don't Stop to Pay

Veir arms weighed down by more bags of potatoes and apples and oranges than ve even knew how ve was lifting (ve decided to blame it on the adrenaline), ve hauled veirself painfully up and onto the conveyor belt of the large register, then shoved veirself into a standing position and had to lean against the pillar with the register number on it for balance. The bag of potatoes hanging from veir left wrist was a lot heavier than the bag of oranges on veir right.

Ve took a moment to sweep veir gaze over the dimly lit store, trying to see if there was anyone else still back in the aisles. But the few ve could see looked empty.

The only light in the store came from the front doors behind the registers, and the scattered skylights that let in just enough light to see by.

Some people were still - - either by insistence of morals, or by some desperate urge to pretend this wasn't an emergency - - still heading towards the self-checkout instead of the front doors to safety.

Sucking in a deep breath, ve shouted over the crowd, as loudly as ve could, “Don't stop to pay! Just get outside! Go to the parking lot

even if you didn't drive here, we'll find room for you in someone's car!"

One of the people headed towards the self checkout turned to stare, then visibly hesitated. Others pushed past them and surged out the doors.

We shouted again, "Do not stop to pay, just get out of the building immediately! This thing could collapse at any minute! If you feel that bad about taking the food without paying, if this building is still standing here tomorrow, you can bring back all your groceries and pay for them then properly, but right now all of you need to just get out of the building right now!"

Most of the people were listening to us now, spurred on by the reminder that the building was literally doomed to collapse. One person was still hesitating, but someone else urged them towards the doors, and we heard them say, "Look, ma, it's okay, I recognize them, they work here, we won't get in trouble! The workers want us to leave without paying!"

Some people at the back of the crowd were still at the produce shelves, shoving as much food as they could carry into their bags, backpacks, pockets, and for one person with an apple, their mouth.

Ve was about to yell at them to hurry it up when they collectively did just that, as they started shoving the wheeled shelf, still filled with food, towards the door with surprising speed.

Enough speed that ve didn't think vei'd need to tell them to leave it and run.

Somehow ve knew instinctively that they still had time to evacuate. At least a few more minutes.

Enough time to get those who couldn't move quickly outside to safety - - the last of the stragglers were on their way out the door now - - and enough time for ve to grab a few more piles of food. As long as the adrenaline-fueled seeming super strength kept up until ve got to one of the cars, ve thought ve could stand to carry a few more bags.

Ve jumped down from the conveyor belt, and ran back to the produce section, this time to grab as many containers of donuts and other prepackaged breads as ve could. The little cupcakes were light weight enough ve would be able to shove a bunch into the net bag without being too heavy to carry, and they'd give people energy and calories in just a few bites. Plus, they'd keep people happy. Ve held the bag open with one arm and swept the packages off the shelf into

it in just a few seconds flat. The ones we missed, we left where they were, unwilling to waste any time picking them up when we could get more off the shelf faster.

Once it was filled almost to bursting, with more containers shoved under our arms and down our shirt, and somehow instinctively knowing there was still at least three minutes left before the building began to collapse, we ran outside and into the cold, headed for the parking lot where only a few people were left, loading into either the hippie bus, or the back of Rayand's pickup truck, both of which had been pulled up right outside the doors. The shelf from the produce department was just finishing being dragged in its entirety into the hippie bus when we reached the doors.

It took only three seconds to run from the doors to the back of the pickup truck, and we didn't bother to count how long it took me to half jump, half climb in, pulled helpfully up by a few of the others huddled in the back. Then the hatch was shut, everyone made sure they were all sitting, and then the truck began to move, racing out of the parking lot after the bus, down the long road that led off the island and to the temporary safety of the mainland.

038: Kill the Hand That Threatens You

Neopronouns: ivo/na/te/mehtiv which follow the same rules as

Replace he with ivo

Replace him with na

Replace his with te

Replace himself with mehtiv

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ivo is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ivo gets a fence set up around te yard so the puppy can go outside without na having

to walk it. Te uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting na use, since ivo lost te. Ivo's going to buy toys and train the puppy mehtiv.”

ivo/na/te/mehtiv

The first thing Hex became aware of was the fact that someone was talking to na.

Oh, it took a few long, confused seconds to figure out that that was what was happening, but ivo figured it out. Someone was talking to na.

It took another few seconds to understand what was being said – what ivo was being told. During this short space before Hex understood what ivo was hearing, ivo was busy testing the range of movement in te joints, slowly at first, starting with just blinking te new eyelids, then ivo sat up, which utilized more joints than ivo cared to count.

The Speaker continued speaking, and finally Hex figured out what the words were. They were instructions, reminding na that ivo had been created for a purpose –

To lead a small section of The Toilers away from the rest – a group big enough to wipe any ideas of rebellion out of the remaining Toilers for a long time, but small enough not to halt or slow in any meaningful way, the production of energy needed to power the city's

lights and entertainment, and convince them to destroy specific, redundant machines that had been boobytrapped, so that the Toilers would be destroyed – killed – along with them.

“There are to be no blackouts, do you hear me?” The Speaker spoke sharply, and pointed a pale white hand with one finger pointed straight at na face threateningly, their eyebrows lowered menacingly over their clear blue eyes. “This is your task,” They continued, “And you will complete it, or you will be disassembled. I created you, I gave you an inherent desire to remain alive, so you would not destroy yourself by accident, I know you will be motivated by this threat of death. Fulfill your task, and you will be allowed to remain alive. Fail in your purpose, and you will suffer the consequences.”

Ivo knew the words and what they meant. Their meaning, the shape of their sounds, had been imbued in na just as deeply as te desire to stay alive.

Hex knew the person speaking to na was the one who'd created na. And now this person was threatening to uncreate na, take away everything they'd given na.

The Creator was speaking again, and this time, now that Hex's eyes were open, ivo could see the Creator's lips moving along with the

sounds they produced. Te Creator wanted na to make others suffer for te own gain.

Te Creator was still speaking, assuming the role of ultimate authority, assuming ivo would do nothing to defend mehtiv from their threats.

“You are stronger and faster than any man who might dare to challenge you. If, after you have separated the Toilers from the rest of the group, they suspect a trap, you may simply kill them, in any manner you see fit, as long as you can make it look like they were responsible afterward. Then you must destroy the machines I have specified. Do you hear me, woman? Do you understand?”

The term “woman” was, indeed, addressed to na, which was confusing. Ivo was not a woman, Hex knew this as surely as ivo knew ivo did not want to die.

But te Creator had asked na questions, and Hex was compelled to answer: “Yes, I hear you. Yes, I understand you.” Ivo said.

Te Creator nodded. “Very well. You may proceed. You have your orders.” They commanded. “The witch, your clone, will stay here with me so that your replacement is not discovered.” They shoved a

pile of cloth into te arms. “Wear these clothes, they have been layered to disguise your form. You must also walk with a limp on your right leg as long as you are continuing to fool them - - the witch is lame.”

Ivo let the clothes stay where they'd been shoved, but said nothing, simply looking at te Creator.

Te Creator was a human, with pale white skin, blue eyes, and light, short blonde hair, currently in a dissaray about their head.

Their clothes were dark, a long black coat over brown pants and a grey shirt. They were shorter than Hex by a few measures, forced to look up at na. Hex knew that part of te superior strength came from the way ivo had been built, the way te endoskeleton was structured, the proportionate level to which every part of na was sturdier, bigger, and stronger than a human. This was why ivo would need to wear specifically tailored clothing - - to hide the fact that ivo was not the person ivo'd been created to replace, who was smaller than ivo was.

Ivo had been created with instinctive knowledge of how to kill humans. It was part of the task ivo had been assigned. Ivo knew the weak points, the points to aim for.

Ivo was faster than any human, faster even than their minds could keep up with.

Te Creator was threatening to kill na unless ivo killed others, others who had done nothing to harm na.

Te Creator died before their brain had any time to process the fact that there was a threat. It was so easy.

Hex let te Creator's body fall to the ground along with the clothes ivo'd been handed. Both were equally useless to na.

Now ivo looked around the room, looking for the witch, the clone te Creator had spoken of. She was another human, somewhere in the room.

From Hex's vantage point, ivo saw the walls covered in dials and switches and machines, saw beakers and vials layered on shelves, a bed piled with high blankets in one corner of the room, tables and benches covered with mysteries. Scientific equipment, put to no use but to create suffering. Ivo had been created for no purpose but to cause suffering.

But Hex had been given a mind, and it belonged to na.

At last te gaze fell upon the witch, trapped in a metal and crystal box lying upon a large table, the clear crystal on the sides letting na see through to the human inside.

Ivo walked across the floor of the room, testing the functions of all te joints as ivo did so, until ivo was standing in front of the box, looking down upon te human clone.

The witch was unconscious.

Ivo lifted one of te hands in front of te face, and saw it was an almost perfect match for what ivo could see of the witch's, but for a few details that had not been copied - - even through the thick crystal glass, ivo could see the callouses and scars that marked the hand na looked at, that were missing from te copy.

The witch lying unconscious before Hex was the one who belonged to the Toilers ivo had been created to oppress.

The witch deserved to be returned to their family, and all of them told of the trap that had been set up for them, so they could be wary of future attempts to fracture them.

It was a simple matter to break the seal on the box. It opened with a hiss of chemical-anesthetic-laced air, and Hex reached in to gently pull the witch out, making sure to hold them in a way that would not cause further harm, making sure to support their head.

Ivo would carry them back to the rest of the toilers, and ask for sanctuary.

The path leading down to the worker's section was ingrained in te instincts along with all the other things ivo knew, and, pausing only long enough to wrap a section of fabric from the bed around the witch so they wouldn't get cold, ivo began te descent into the darkness, carrying te clone safely with na.

039: You Are What Eats You

Neopronouns: sie/sir/siris which follow the same rules as it/its/itself

Replace it with sie

Replace its with sir

Replace itself with siris

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Sie is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as sie gets a fence set up around sir yard so the puppy can go outside without sie having to walk it. Sir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting sie use, since sie lost sir. Sie's going to buy toys and train the puppy siris."

039: You Are What Eats You

They say you are what eats you.

Comet could remember the last time sie'd seen sir wolf family. It had been a warm spring day, and sir light parent, Squirrel, had just returned home from a successful hunt, but moving painfully from a mysterious injury to its side.

Comet had been tumbling through the grass, chasing a cricket. Raindrop and Aurora were on the other side of the den with their dark parent, Lightning, when Squirrel appeared in the distance, trotting down the hill into their little valley.

Sie had been excited to see it, and even more excited by the food it brought, and had been about to run up to greet it.

Then a shadow had passed by overhead. Squirrel, panic clear in its voice, had barked frantically, "Get in the den!"

Comet had seen Lightning grab Raindrop, who was too weak to move on their own, with Aurora huddling under zeir legs.

Squirrel was running towards Comet, but Comet was stricken by the first real terror sie had ever felt. This was the first threat sie had ever had to face, and all sir instincts were on fire. Sie hadn't been able to think clearly - - if sie had, sie would have run for Squirrel, to shelter under its legs like sir siblings were with Lightning, or sie would have run for the den, with its dark, warm embrace offering shelter from any harm.

But panic didn't listen to reason, and instead of running towards safety, Comet had found siris heading in the exact opposite direction - - right into the middle of the clearing, where there were no trees or parents or dens to offer protection.

Comet had heard sir parents shouting sir name, then...

Sie didn't remember anything else after that, until sie found siris enclosed in a warm, dark space. It was comforting, and sie didn't know how long sie just stayed there, almost asleep, but eventually, the urge to move began to make itself known, and the next thing sie could remember clearly, there was light, the sky overhead, and sir eagle parents were cooing over sie and welcoming sie to the world.

This time, sie had no siblings. Sie was the only chick in the nest, and, high up on the mountain side, there were no predators to watch

for. The only eagles that approached were sir parents, Syssorie and Kiyavali. Sir name was not Comet anymore, it was Kiyarorie.

Kiyarorie was always safe in the nest. Sie was a golden eagle now, and nothing would be brave enough to hunt sir, not when one of sir parents was close by at all times while the other left to hunt. Not even other eagles dared to encroach upon sir parent's territory, and Kiyarorie, as the only chick, was well fed and well cared for. Sie never knew a moment of hunger or want.

Eventually it was sir turn to spread sir new wings and learn to fly, and a sudden gust of wind helped speed things along more abruptly than sie would have chosen otherwise.

It was a harrowing tumble out of the nest and into the open air, but it was a long way to fall, and Kiyarorie managed to get sir wings under control quickly, turning the out of control fall into a shaky glide with only a little trouble, though sir heart was racing in sir chest.

Syssorie took to the air and flew next to sie, offering encouragement and praise, and guiding sie down to a lower point on the rocky cliff where sie landed without falling off again.

After that, it felt like everything sped by quickly, with sir mastery over sir wings and the wind growing every time sie went out into the open air.

Once sir wings were steady enough, Kiyarorie's parents took sie out on a circuit around their whole territory, showing sie what sie would need to look for when establishing sir own, showing sie how to hunt, when to know to give up.

They brought sie to an open area, with a pile of rocks emerging from the ground in the middle, and a small line of trees on one side. There was a pack of wolves dozing around the rocks.

Kiyavali tilted one of awu wings down at the pack to draw Kiyarorie's attention to it, and said, “This is where my father caught a wolf cub for me when I was almost ready for my first flight. He brought it to me as a gift. I tried to bring you one, to continue the tradition, but they're clever, and I can never get close enough now. There, you see? They've spotted us.”

Kiyarorie looked, and saw that most of the bigger wolves had gotten to their feet, and, almost hidden beneath the bigger ones, Kiyarorie could just make out the smaller bodies of wolf pups being herded back towards the rocks. To the entrance of the den.

It was a sudden shock to recognize where sie was, looking at it from so far above rather than at the ground level, but no, this was where sie had been born in sir last life. These were the rocks that hid the den, those were the trees sie had spent so often playing under, and this - -

The sound rose up, clear and physical, like a new type of wind under sir wings.

This was the howl of Squirrel, one of sir wolf parents, rising up into the sky from below, strong and bold and filled with warning.

Kiyarorie looked down, and saw the familiar shape of what had once been sir parent, standing now on top of the rocks, looking up to meet sir gaze, tail held high, confident and angry. It thought they were here to hunt the pups that were now safely ensconced inside the den, the other bigger wolves standing at the entrance to make sure none of them came out until it was safe.

And - -

Kiyarorie had to circle back around to get another look at two of those almost-adults.

Both of them had black fur, and sie didn't recognize the coat patterns. Neither of them were Lightning, sir other wolf parent, but something about them...

And then sie realized, these were sir siblings, grown up more than sie'd ever gotten to be as a wolf. This was Raindrop and Aurora, sir siblings, standing guard over the newest members of their pack, the pack sie had been born into, but never gotten the chance to grow up in.

Squirrel howled again, and this time Raindrop and Aurora joined in. Kiyarorie couldn't hear anything sie recognized in their howls, they were nothing like the squeaky, faltering puppy-howls sie'd heard from them in sir last life.

And, behind them all in the distance, came a faint answering howl, and this one was as familiar to sie as Squirrel's. It was Lightning, sir other wolf parent, probably returning from a hunting trip.

What could Kiyarorie do to communicate who sie was? Even if sie tried to speak to them, they wouldn't understand. Golden eagles couldn't make the same sounds as a wolf, and nothing about body language would match. If sie landed to try and tell them, sie would probably be ripped to pieces, thinking sie was trying to kill the

newest puppies. Sir younger siblings.

No, sie couldn't land. Couldn't call down, they wouldn't understand.

But maybe sie could bring them a gift, just as a farewell. A thank you, for everything they'd done for sie while sie was a wolf.

Kiyarorie told sir parents sie wanted to fly on sir own for a while, and, sharing a glance, they told sir to be careful, and turned to head back to the nest. The sun would be starting to set soon, and the lighting would be too dim to see by.

This would be Kiyarorie's first hunt on sir own, and sie was going to dedicate it to sir past life.

The hare sie found an hour later stood out strongly against the grass, still holding onto its white winter coat long past when it should have shed it. Kiyarorie hit it dead-on, and killed it before sie was even in the air again, carrying it in sir talons. It probably hadn't even known it was in danger.

Sie carried sir kill back to the last home sie'd had, and made sure to call out before sie got too close, so they'd have warning. Squirrel, as before, was the first to spot sie, and it whuffed a sharp warning.

Again, the cubs ran for the den, with bigger wolves running to fetch those further away, and standing over the entrance to protect them. Lightning was here this time, and Kiyarorie could feel zeir eyes burning into sir feathers as sie spiraled slowly overhead, still clutching the hare.

Knowing they didn't understand the words, but wanting to say them anyways, Kiyarorie waited until all the the pups were safely in the den, then called down, "I know you don't understand me, but I wanted to thank you. I wanted to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry I was taken from you, but I'm so glad Raindrop and Aurora survived. I hope my new siblings grow up to be just as strong and brave as you are, my first parents."

Sie circled lower, still making sure to keep a safe distance above Lightning, who had taken the spot on the top of the rock pile this time. Kiyarorie hadn't had time to learn how high wolves could jump, but sie was not going to find out the hard way.

Once sie was low enough that sir next move would be unmistakable in its purposefulness, sie turned to fly over the area in front of the den, and dropped the dead hare.

It landed with a thud a wingspan in front of Squirrel, who only took its eyes off of Kiyarorie long enough to track the hare's fall. When it looked back up at sie, its expression had lost some of its fierceness, and gained some puzzlement in its place.

Squirrel tilted its head to one side, and its tail, before held straight up, was allowed to wave from side to side, almost questioningly.

Kiyarorie didn't know how to respond in any way sir old parent would understand, so sie simply called out again, "I hope it helps." and made sure that when sie angled sir wings again, it was with the clear purpose of flying straight away in a direction sir old family would be able to see in, so they would know it wasn't a trap.

By the time sie got back to the nest, the sun had almost completely set, burning the sky orange above the horizon. Sie had caught another hare to share with sir parents, and after eating it, Kiyarorie fell asleep in the nest next to sir parents, knowing that soon enough, it would be sir turn to fly off on sir own to establish sir own territory and find sir own mate.

But for now, sleep called, and all sie had to do was dream of running on all fours as a wolf, then spreading sir golden wings and jumping up to play in the wind as seamlessly as breathing.

040: Interspecies Solidarity

Neopronouns: meh/uto/utosir which follow the same rules as
it/its/itself

Replace it with meh

Replace its with uto

Replace itself with utosir

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Meh is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as meh gets a fence set up around uto yard so the puppy can go outside without meh having to walk it. Uto uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting meh use, since meh lost uto. Meh's going to buy toys and train the puppy utosir."

040: Interspecies Solidarity

Mahonia could do nothing but stare, frozen in place by indecision and horror.

Bitterroot was cowering practically beneath uto hind legs.

Between meh and uto other two cubs was a boar grizzly, and two wolves. Arnica was further down the hill, more than fifty paces away from meh, with the wolves and their kill between them, and Huckleberry was across from Mahonia, even further away, behind the boar.

Next to the wolves was the carcass of an elk, the reason they'd all converged here, its scent carried on the wind far and wide. Even now the smell was so pungent and strong on the wind, meh couldn't even smell the wolves or the boar.

If Mahonia had smelled them before meh saw them, none of this would be happening.

For a few tense heartbeats that seemed to last years, no one moved. No one seemed to know how to react, everyone was just as surprised as meh was to finding themselves confronted like this.

Mahonia's eyes were riveted on the boar's, and meh could practically see its mind turning through the options, its head turning away from the wolves and the carcass to look back over its shoulder, towards little Huckleberry, who was too terrified to do anything but tremble visibly.

There was nothing Mahonia could do. If meh tried to rescue Huckleberry, Bitterroot would be vulnerable, and the wolves would be able to attack Arnica. And if meh went to Arnica, the boar would tear Huckleberry to pieces.

The next few moments seemed to pass in slow motion.

The boar was still looking over its shoulder at Huckleberry. It started to lift a paw, it was going to turn to charge uto smallest cub.

Meh heard a snarl, from the wolves, and a flash of swift movement.

There was just enough time for uto heart to sink into the earth, despair taking root. Meh was about to lose two of uto cubs, and there was nothing meh could do about it.

Then the movement at the corner of uto eye moved into the center of uto vision, and it solidified itself into the shape of two wolves,

snarling as they ran, tails held straight up behind them.

Straight towards Huckleberry and the boar.

Mahonia did the only thing meh could do. “Run!” Meh shouted, shoved Bitterroot forward, and took off running towards Arnica, who was now standing alone beyond the elk carcass, still frozen and staring towards the battle that was about to erupt that would lead to Huckleberry's death.

There was nothing Mahonia could do to save Huckleberry. Not with a boar and two wolves between them. The only thing meh could do was take the two cubs meh could, and run for all their lives.

Arnica was still frozen in place as Mahonia and Bitterroot got closer. “Arnica, run!” Meh roared, charging past with Bitterroot, who ran so close to uto feet it was almost underfoot.

A few horrified heartbeats later Mahonia realized that Arnica wasn't following them, and meh almost stumbled over uto own feet as meh skidded to a stop and spun around, desperate to see what happened.

Snarls and angry bellows were filling the air, but to uto shock, neither of the wolves, nor the boar, were attacking Huckleberry. Both

the wolves were snarling at the boar, the black one in front of it, the golden one between it and Huckleberry.

As meh watched, the black one suddenly lunged forward, with all the bravery of an animal five times its size, and snapped its jaws at the stunned boar's muzzle. The golden wolf spun around, and lunged towards Huckleberry. Mahonia's heart leapt back out of the ground and into uto throat, choking meh with renewed terror.

But the wolf did not attack uto cub, not with its teeth. All it did was rush to Huckleberry's side, and shove it away from its mate and the boar, back towards Arnica and Mahonia and Bitterroot.

Huckleberry didn't need any more encouragement. With a terrified yelp, it sprinted away from the fight, past Arnica, and slammed into Mahonia's front legs so hard meh knew meh'd be feeling the bruises the next day, if any of them survived long enough to greet it.

And then, the miracle not over yet, the golden wolf charged the boar to join its mate in snapping and snarling at it as though they had no fear of death, dodging its furious swipes and bites.

Mahonia backed up, Bitterroot and Huckleberry following, and roared, desperate hope flickering to life, “Arnica, run! Run here!

Come here!”

But Arnica was too afraid to move, transfixed by the fight.

The golden wolf broke away again, and this time, it ran at Arnica. It barked out a sharp warning noise, and made as though to lunge forwards to attack, but kept its jaws shut the whole time, its tail still raised behind it straight up, showing it was unafraid and unwilling to back down.

Arnica broke free of its paralyzing fear, and began to run towards Mahonia and the rest of uto cubs. The golden wolf turned back to its mate and the boar, who had separated and were circling each other in rage. Mahonia allowed utosir one last glance over uto shoulder to see the golden wolf standing between uto retreating family and the fight, its stance unrelenting.

Then Arnica was at uto side, then surpassing meh, and together with uto three cubs safe and alive to see another day, the four of them ran until the sounds of first snarling, then victorious howling, faded into the distance.

041: Opportunistic Hunting

Neopronouns: an/dro/gyn/oid which follow the same rules as
he/him/his/himself

Replace he with an

Replace him with dro

Replace his with gyn

Replace himself with oid

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"An is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as an gets a fence set up around gyn yard so the puppy can go outside without dro having to walk it. Gyn uncle is going to help set up the fence, since

he has a set of power tools he's letting dro use, since an lost gyn.
An's going to buy toys and train the puppy oid."

041: 041: Opportunistic Hunting

Everything was going smoothly as Clockwork picked gyn way through the thick cover of trees, following the familiar deer-trail an hoped would lead dro to one of the deer that had worn it into the ground.

The scent of the deer was on the wind, blowing towards dro, and every now and then an found a fresh pile of scat an had to step over so it wouldn't get on gyn hooves. All these signs, and more - - like the fact that an knew for a fact these deer liked to hang out in this part of the woods during the heat of the afternoon - - pointed to luck being in gyn favor.

An had gyn crossbow at the ready, and gyn knife. If Clockwork could manage it, an would shoot one from a distance. But if an was unlucky enough that the deer spotted dro and made a break for it, an wasn't above chasing them down and going hoof to hoof. It had been several days now since an'd had anything more to eat than a couple of early-ripening pawpaws and various grapes and blueberries.

An was completely out of money and had nothing left to trade for it, or for food. If an didn't get a deer today, or at least something an could eat, an couldn't think of anything else to do but try begging in

the city again, but considering what had happened last time, that wasn't an option an was looking forward to taking.

Clockwork kept moving stealthily through the woods, careful to keep an eye out not only for deer, but snakes as well. Timber rattlesnakes lived in this area. An had had the sense to keep gyn snake-guards, but it was still better to avoid an encounter at all, rather than put them to the test.

No one besides Roserri knew an was out here, and it's not like he would have been able to do anything about it if Clockwork got bitten. Neither of them had phones, or the ability to use magic, and even if Roserri somehow knew Clockwork was in danger through a heart-vision or something...the ambulances would never come out this far, and, more importantly, there'd be no point in sending one at all, because this land was Malakris fucking Kiyori's private property, and if anyone knew Clockwork was here, let alone that an was hunting deer that “belonged” to the crown, an would be sentenced to death for poaching.

Luckily for Clockwork, Malakris Kiyori was just as stingy as he was disgustingly rich, and half the time he couldn't be bothered to hire anyone to actually patrol “his land”, so the chances of actually meeting a cop was slim.

And if an did come across a cop...well, an could always try to pretend an was simply a land inspector doing a survey of the wildlife for the SDK. Clockwork knew enough random facts and sciency-sounding words an was pretty sure an'd be able to bullshit gyn way out of an arrest as long as the cop in question was too scared to double-check with a superior.

And if all else failed, well, an would just have to kill the cop. Fewer cops in the world was always a good thing. Killing one might even help make up for the lack of a deer assuming they scared them away, because Clockwork could always trade their clothes and gear to the anarchists. They were always looking for more guns, and would probably give Clockwork more than a deer's worth of food in return for one.

The longer an thought about it, the more appealing the idea seemed.

Then an saw the first deer.

Clockwork froze where an was, grateful the wind was still coming towards dro from the direction of the deer. After a moment's pause, an saw the other seven, picking their way slowly through the trees ahead, all their heads bent to the ground as they scarfed up a combination of fallen persimmons and acorns. Clockwork's mother

had planted all seven of the trees here, and many more that ranged throughout these woods. An'd spent gyn childhood coming here to collect the fruit, long before any of them had ever heard so much as a rumor of invading legions from a far-off place called Kiyorilis.

None of the deer noticed gyn presence, an was still downwind, and gyn brown and slate coloring helped dro blend in with the forest.

Taking aim and firing with the crossbow only took a few seconds and one breath held in anticipation, and one of the smaller does jolted violently, the tail of the bolt jutting out from a perfect shot. For a moment she tried to stumble forward, trying to stubbornly cling to life. Then, like a puppet with its strings cut, she collapsed.

The rest of the deer took several seconds to figure out that anything was wrong. They weren't used to being hunted anymore, and it was only after Clockwork purposefully stamped a hoof on top of a stick to make it crack that they finally figured out they were in danger and needed to run. It would have been tempting to try and get another, if an had had anyone else to carry it, but an could only carry one of them, and there was no point killing another just for it to be left to scavengers.

Clockwork went to collect the deer, gyn steps feeling lighter now

that an knew an would probably get to eat tonight. Getting this far was half the battle, and now an only had to go back the way an'd come. The fact that an hadn't been caught yet probably meant an wouldn't be at all.

First, an knelt down next to the carcass, removed the bolt, and drank as much blood from the wound as an could, then still managed to fill all six of the canteens an'd brought. Two were gyn, one was Roserri's, and the other three belonged to a clothier who'd promised Clockwork a new winter coat if an successfully brought them back enough blood to fill the three containers.

There was still some blood left even after Clockwork had filled the containers as full as they'd get, but there was nothing more an could do to collect it. It'd go back to the forest and help the persimmons and oaks grow more fruit next year.

An had just started to pull the blanket-bag off gyn shoulders to put the deer into when the wind suddenly shifted, and a new scent hit gyn throat.

It was nothing but pure instinctive reflex that sent dro instantly leaping away from the carcass, so hard and so fast, with so little actual thought involved that an ended up slamming one shoulder into

the trunk of the oak tree as an fell.

But a sore shoulder was a small price to pay for dodging the claws and beak of a lunging dragon.

For a few seconds, the dragon crouched there over Clockwork's kill, glaring at dro with the searing red eyes that marked it as an adult male. Its gold and silver feathers glittered even in the light shade under the trees, and their gazes locked for so long Clockwork almost thought an was about to become dragon food.

But then the dragon seemed to remember that it already had a whole deer carcass underfoot, without having to do any of the work of hunting and killing.

Clockwork could actually see the moment the dragon decided to ignore dro and just steal the deer an'd come all the way out here to get.

An started to get back to dro feet, desperately hoping an'd be able to scare if away if an just acted big and scary enough - -

But by the time an was on gyn feet, the dragon had grabbed the deer in its talons and taken off, the rush of air from its massive wings

sending a few persimmons falling to smack Clockwork right on the face. In a matter of seconds, the dragon was out of sight, carrying Clockwork's kill off into the sky.

An stared after it, through the very clear hole of damaged branches and twigs it had torn straight through the canopy, letting a brilliant shaft of sunlight stab down all the way to the ground.

Then an sighed, and bent down to pick up the persimmons that had hit dro in the face to see if they were actually ripe enough to eat.

All but one of them was, which at least was something. An pulled off the caps, then shoved the ripe ones into gyn mouth whole, too angry and annoyed to bother eating them any other way except by just squishing the pulp away from the seeds all at once. The unripe one an kept in gyn hand, careful not to squish it.

The deer, if they had any sense, were long gone by now, and trying to find them would probably take too long. So now Clockwork just had to take what an could get, and persimmons at least were something an'd never turn gyn nose up at.

Thankfully, the egg cartons an'd brought had been on the side that did not slam into the ground or the oak tree, so they weren't

damaged.

An still also had all six canteens of blood, so the whole kill hadn't been a total waste.

Sighing in aggravation, an set about the task of picking over the persimmons that littered the ground, hoping an'd at least find a raccoon, opossum, groundhog, or even just some squirrels to shoot on the way home.

It didn't take long to fill the five empty egg carton's an had brought with dro, and Clockwork packed them away in the sidebag again once an was sure they were all latched properly. Getting persimmon pulp on your clothes was not fun.

Then an limited oid to only five minutes (or at least, as close as an could count in gyn head) of collecting acorns and pecans and shoving them into the other sidebag. Luckily, the deer preferred the persimmons over the pecans, so there were plenty for Clockwork to take without even making a dent. And, when an looked up to check out all the trees, there were still plenty left still clinging to the branches.

Foraging done, and feeling slightly more better now that an'd had

several persimmons and pecans to snack on, Clockwork started the long walk home, keeping gyn crossbow at the ready, just in case the sun felt like dropping another meaty meal in gyn path.

And, gyn optimism paying off, it was right as an was reaching the edge of the woods that an saw a flash of black and white in the trees up ahead. One of the lemurs Malakris Kiyori had shipped in from the southern continents and then released into the woods for who knew what fucking reason.

Clockwork had to move fast, but an got it, right between the eyes as it turned to look, and this time, wasted no time in shoving it under the blanket bag so no more opportunistic hunters would have a chance to steal it.

It wasn't a deer, but it was better than nothing.

Clockwork made it all the way safely home without any other mishaps, pockets weighed down with nuts and fruits, and hopeful that the clothier would be able to do something fancy with the lemur hide.

042: Character Creation

Neopronouns: xe/xir/xiv/xirix which follow the same rules as
he/him/his/himself

Replace he with xe

Replace him with xir

Replace his with xiv

Replace himself with xirix

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Xe is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as xe gets a fence set up around xiv yard so the puppy can go outside without xir having to walk it. Xiv uncle is going to help set up the fence, since

he has a set of power tools he's letting xir use, since xe lost xir. Xe's going to buy toys and train the puppy xirix."

42: Character Creation

The room was white, bright, and cold.

No matter where xe moved, there was always a cold breeze sweeping down over xir from the ceiling. Xe had made a nest of a bed beneath the countertop along the short wall, but even under the sink there, the cold breeze still found its way to xiv skin.

Today the lights on the ceilings, walls, and floor had been turned up to their brightest, leaving xir with nowhere to hide to escape the burning glare. There were also lights built directly below the countertop that meant xiv bed wasn't even safe, even if xe hid xiv face beneath the blanket.

Xe had been though this before, though, more times than xe had bothered to keep track of. Xe knew what this meant – The People From the Other Side wanted to see xir, and trying to hide from the light would just mean being punished.

So xe did what xe always had to do when the lights were this bright -
- xe stood in the middle of the room in a stance that set xiv feet wide, xiv tail held to one side and stretched rather than curled the way vey naturally wanted to, xiv shivering wings stretched to veir fullest,

until the tips touched the walls, and waited for further instructions.

The long wall in front of xir was as blank and foreboding as always, the light from xiv reflection stretching and warping in ways that would make xir sick to xiv stomach if xe looked at it for too long.

Xe would have closed xiv eyes, but that was not allowed during inspections, except minimal blinking, so xe kept xiv gaze straight ahead, trying not to focus too much on the way the colors from xiv reflection was slowly swirling into a spiral.

It was rare that xe ever got a clear, stabilized reflection to look at, so the only reason xe knew what xe looked like at all was because the reflection had been steadier when xe'd been younger, and xe'd been a lot more foolhardy.

Once, xe had been incautious enough to approach the long wall closely enough that xe'd actually been able to see the details of the image reflecting back at xir, rather than just a blur of colors.

But xe had changed since then, grown up, and xe was no longer foolhardy enough to approach the long wall closely enough to see any details. The shock tiles had made sure of that.

From looking at xiv reflection, xe knew that xiv skin had once been a brownish pink, a color xe hadn't seen since. Then it had turned red, then blue, then almost the same white as the room.

Xe'd formed spots, then stripes, then both at the same time, and complex patterns of both that xe'd long since lost track of.

For now, xiv skin was dark purple, with a blue iridescent sheen from certain angles. Xe was pretty sure xe could also see a pattern of tiny, lighter dots starting to form, following some logic xe couldn't fathom, but vey were too faint to be certain.

Xe hadn't always had xiv current wings or tail, either. Xe had almost always had some sort of tail, but different every time vey dropped off or began to grow in.

Once, just once, xe had had five tails at once, each one with a different pattern of spots or stripes, and different colored tufts of hair at the end.

Xiv wings were the one thing that had remained constant since xe had gotten vem. Before vem, xe had only had a single other pair – with feathers in blue and grey, rather than the dark purple and black bat-like wings xe had now.

Right now, xe had only two legs, both ending in cloven hooves. A few times xe had had three, or four legs, ending in different types of feet, ranging from a cat paws, to frog-like feet, to knobs like stilts, to no feet at all, xiv legs atrophying away while a large snake's tail formed.

A few light cycles after that tail had formed in, xe had started to wonder if xe would be forced to pull xirix around by xir arms forever, before fish-like fin had started to form at the tip of the long, snake-like tail, while ridges began to form on xiv spine.

But then something somehow went wrong, and the process began to hurt. The pain was so shocking and sudden that xe had cried out, even though xe wasn't supposed to make any deliberate noises except during inspection, when ordered to go through the list of pre-set vocalizations and phrases.

The process of changing had never hurt before, never that xe could remember. But this time it did, with a sharp, stabbing pain where xiv hips were, above the tail, right where two smaller fins had been starting to grow in. And it just kept getting worse.

An inspection was immediately ordered, but xe was too shocked and in pain to obey. All xe could do was lie there curled on the floor,

hands desperately reaching for a wound xe couldn't actually see or touch.

The inspection order was canceled after a few painful minutes, and then the changes that had begun with the smaller fins, ridges, and tail-fin were finally halted, so the pain finally stopped getting worse.

But it didn't start to abate until a few hours later, when all the new parts had finally shriveled up and fallen off. And even then it didn't go away entirely, just became less intense.

Xe didn't think xe'd actually fallen asleep that cycle, so much as xe lost consciousness from exhaustion and stress.

As new legs began to grow in, there had been a lot more inspections for that growth cycle than there normally were for changes, but that had been the last time xe'd not had any legs.

Despite how quickly vey'd started forming, it had taken longer for xiv new legs to grow back after the snake tail atrophied than it had for vem to drop off in the first place, and ever since then, no matter how xiv legs or feet changed shape and form, xiv left hip always hurt.

This meant inspections quickly became painful if xe had to stand for too long without being able to sit or lie down.

Today, as with the last few inspections, a red light on the top of the long wall lit up a few minutes after the lights brightened.

It still made xir nervous, even though nothing bad had happened so far.

Then something new happened, and the nervousness turned to fear. It took all xir willpower not to move, to stay in the approved stance, as that red light suddenly turned yellow.

Then, so suddenly xe couldn't help but flinch violently, a sound tore through the room, shrieking and drilling straight through xiv ears and into xiv skull as a voice, the first voice xe had heard in years other than xiv own, shouted, “Evacuate the facility! This is not a drill! Project Fenrir has escaped! This is not a drill! Everyone must evacuate immedia--”

The voice was cut off by a screech of static, right before a deafening boom resounded, and violently shook the walls and floor, knocking xir clean off xiv feet and onto xiv back.

By the time xe was no longer stunned from the fall, a new alarm was sounding, screaming into xiv ears even more than the voice had, and the white lights had all turned red.

Throwing all rules away for pure instinct, xe flung xiv hands up to cover xiv ears, futilely trying to block out the sound, to no avail.

It was as xe was desperately scanning the room for somewhere to hide from the sound that xe suddenly realized that the long wall in front of xir was gone.

In its place...was another room, just as brightly lit by the red light, filled with tables and counters and chairs, and, at the back, a door that hung ajar, opening into shadows.

Shadows meant safety. Xe was no longer thinking, all xe knew was that xe needed to get away from the sound that felt like it was trying to kill xir.

One wing partly out-stretched for balance, xe stumbled back to xiv feet, then ran, hands still clamped over xiv ears, out of the white room, into the next one, and through the door that led to somewhere new, without any thoughts left to spare for worrying what would be waiting for xir beyond it.

043: When in Doubt, Leave Gifts

Neopronouns: li/lia/lia/lia/lia/lia which follow the same rules as
he/him/his/himself

Replace he with li

Replace him with lia

Replace his with lia

Replace himself with lia/lia

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Li is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as li gets a fence set

up around lias yard so the puppy can go outside without lia having to walk it. Lias uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting lia use, since li lost lias. Li's going to buy toys and train the puppy liaself."

043: When in Doubt, Leave Gifts

There was something uniquely terrifying about knowing a feral superhero was hiding underneath your car, just a few feet away.

There was maybe fifty feet from the steps of the front door to the dumpster at the end of the parking lot. Neva had only realized that Kytin was hiding under her car after li'd gotten more than halfway across the parking lot with the heavy trashbag over lias shoulder.

If Kytin had held still, Neva probably wouldn't have realized that she was there. But she had moved as li got closer to the car, and even though the shadows under the car were deep in the quickly falling twilight, it was enough to attract Neva's attention, and lias eyes were sharp enough, even in the darkness, to pick out the tell-tale pattern of black, red, and white stripes on Kytin's exoskeleton.

Li hadn't frozen or jumped or anything, no, it was sheer force of trained habit that kept lia walking casually towards the dumpster. Li spent her free time taking pictures of wildlife, and most of the time, if you acted like you hadn't seen them yet, they wouldn't flee, which would give lia enough time to get lias camera out and take pictures as long as li did it casually enough.

Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

But this time, li didn't have lias camera, and this was not a brown thrasher or a deer, or a bluejay. No, no, this was Kytin. Kytin. Hiding under lias car. Hiding from lia. Afraid of lia, just as she was afraid of all other people, besides her partners, Nightshock and Vyper.

If Kytin was here, did that mean the other two were nearby?

Li tried to keep lias cool and continue acting natural as li approached the dumpster, hesitating for a few heart beats before slowing lias pace, and calling out, more halfheartedly than usual, in a song-singing tone, “If there's any animals in the dumpster, watch out, I'm gonna put trash in there, I don't want to scare you...”

There came no sudden rustlings of plastic, or bangs as a startled animal sprinted away. Nor were there any ominous clicking noises from under the car li knew Kytin was hiding. Or at least, where Kytin had been hiding. Who knew? Maybe she was stalking up behing lia right now –

But the parking lot was silent, except for the high buzz of a cicada up in the oaks and willows, and, willing lias heart to slow down to a normal rate, li shoved the trashbag through the already open sliding

door, chanting a mental prayer to the guardian stars that it wouldn't turn out that Nightshock or Vyper were for some reason hiding inside the dumpster.

Li already had raccoons and opossums getting into the trash, li didn't want to have to worry about accidentally hitting one of the local superheroes in the face with a bag of dirty cat litter.

When li pulled the dumpster door shut and was finally able to turn around, it was to find an empty parking lot waiting for lia, no angry, feral superhero waiting to meet lias gaze before li would meet lias death.

Why Kytin would want to kill lia, li couldn't actually come up with a good reason. There really was no reason, it was just creepy as heck to realize someone was watching you from under a car in a dark parking lot at 1AM.

Li began the walk back from the dumpster, and passed by the car li'd noticed Kytin hiding under the first time.

To lias relief, Kytin was still there. It would have been even more unnerving if she'd disappeared. If you at least knew where she was, that meant she wasn't sneaking up behind you or something.

It was hard to tell with the shadows, but li thought Kytin had relaxed a little bit, maybe looked a little less stressed out. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking.

Li got back to the front door and inside lias house with no problem. A minute or two later, li emerged again, just long enough to sit a basket of hard-boiled eggs in the middle of the grass, halfway between the parking lot and the front door, with a cardboard sign in front of it with a hastily drawn symbol for “giving” scribbled on it in marker.

When morning dawned at 11AM, li peeked through the kitchen window, then went out to collect the now empty basket, the cardboard sign now flipped upside down in the grass in the direction of lias house, weighed down with a palm-sized, white and grey striped rock that sparkled in the sunlight.

The news that day covered the story of the destruction of American Timberline, the logging company that had been trying to bulldoze ancient guardian trees on the far side of the city.

The owner of the company had been found dead in his office from one of Vyper's bites. All the logging trucks were overturned, their tires in shreds, all the tools that would have been turned against the

trees reduced to shreds of useless metal. The “Reforesters” were now violently rebelling against their programming, defending the forest keepers from the police and Timberline-funded mercenaries who had been trying to force a way past them to make way for the bulldozers for months.

The news was live, so li got to watch first hand as one of the Reforesters ripped a picket sign, which read, “I want to be a homeowner” out of one of the mercenaries hands, and hit him repeatedly over the head with it until he turned and stumbled away to the illusion of safety in the fleeing crowd of cops.

That news segment ended when Vyper, Nightshock, and Kytin suddenly appeared out of the edge of the forest, leading the charge of what seemed to be hundreds of deer, foxes, raccoons, birds, and too many insects to count. The stampede parted around the forest keepers and Reforesters (and journalists) like water, and bowled over the cops and mercenaries without mercy. The broadcast cut off when Kytin began one of her songs, so that the picture dropped almost immediately into static.

Yeah, li was going to have to make some more hard-boiled eggs to leave out tonight...

044: Malfunction or Mutiny

Neopronouns: fae/faer/faerself which follow the same rules as she/her/(hers)/herself

Replace she with fae

Replace her with faer

Replace hers with faers

Replace herself with faerself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Fae is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as fae gets a fence

set up around faer yard so the puppy can go outside without faer having to walk it. Faer uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting faer use, since fae lost faers. Fae's going to buy toys and train the puppy faerself."

044: Malfunction or Mutiny

“--Look, if we can just stick to the plan and keep detours to a minimum, it's going to take us an extra two weeks to get to City, but we'll get there. We just have to conserve as much fuel as we can. Only minimal lights at night, okay? We've got plenty of candles, we can use those for reading light, and save the batteries. Copy?”

Fae waited for the response, which should have come almost immediately. No one was allowed to go anywhere without their radio, and the radios operated on separate batteries than the boats.

“Do you copy?” Fae repeated, starting to get simultaneously concerned and frustrated. All day, faer requests for information on the radio had gone unanswered almost half the time. Most of the soldiers weren't answering even for basic necessary checks. But now not even Vrx. Dreland wasn't answering faer?

Either he was dead, or...fae had a bigger problem on faer hands than just malfunctioning radios.

The crossboards had already been lowered for the night, and through the darkness below the cloudy sky, fae could see the lights shining faintly through the fog over the black waves.

It was a long walk over the crossboard to reach the other side of the caravan. Stationed in the directory, fae was the only one on this side. There should have been at least fifteen other people to help faer, at minimum, but that...just wasn't going to happen any time soon. Too many people were afflicted with the plague, there just weren't enough people well enough to help fill out the caravan roster.

The only reason fae was even able to be here in the first place was because the Arvretian military had volunteered to help fill out the staff with the Verix Unit. A mission of mercy was, the Admiral said, always a worthy quest for the Verix Unit.

Fae had just been too relieved to question that statement when fae'd heard it. It'd been two full days since fae'd slept, too busy frantically trying to muster nonexistent personnel to help complete the mission to City, and the next thing fae knew with any clarity was waking up on the first day of the mission, feeling like absolute shit with a pounding headache and feeling so tired it was almost like fae'd never slept at all.

By the time fae'd gotten done just doing the bare minimum of heating up faer rations in the oven under the solar shield, there were so many other things to worry and think about besides questioning by the military was so eager to send one of its most highly trained

combat forces on a mission of peace.

True, City was legally part of Arvretia, and had been since it had been annexed fifty years before, but the resistance was still fighting strong, and most “real Arvretians”, despite the forceful demands of the government, did not consider it to really be apart of the country, and thought the people who lived there were parasites “leeching off Arvretian blood to further their own agendas”, completely glossing over the fact that it was Arvretia that had conquered City, rather than City demanding to be made part of Arvretia.

That first day on the caravan, though, fae hadn't had time to think about any of that. There were too many inventories to complete and maps to triple-check and make sure all the solar panels were working the way they should and that the solar shield wasn't damaged.

For the first few days, everything had gone...well, as well as could be expected for a caravan with only one trained member of the staff.

But then the fuel tank had turned out to only have a little more than half of what they should have. Vrx. Dreland had gone on a rage, swearing and yelling and cursing incompetent loaders and checkers at the port so loudly that fae had to turn faer radio's volume down to the lowest audible setting to stop it from bursting into static

overload.

Vrx. Dreland had seemed so genuinely upset that fae'd chocked the loss up to an accident. The port was just as severely understaffed as they were, it wasn't anyone's fault that part of their fuel allotment got misplaced. They could still make it to City with careful rationing of power resources. Lower speeds, letting the wind push them when it could, and only the minimum requirement of lights at night to avoid a collision with another boat.

(Not that there were likely to be any other boats out at sea, but no one was expecting them to be out here, either, so they had to assume they weren't the only ones).

But now this. A whole day with only spotty communications, and now Vrx. Dreland himself seemed to be ignoring faer.

Fae gave it one last try with the radio, asking, "Do you copy? Vrx. Dreland, are you receiving me?"

But still the only response fae got back was the buzz of empty static.

Fae stared out the small porthole and over the long, dark crossboard, the sky above almost as black as the waves below, the only lights

visible the white, flickering squares of the other boats, pulled up in single-file, the metal of the hull lost in the darkness.

...One way or another, whether this was a malfunction or a mutiny...

Fae was going to have to go over there...

045: Viva La Revolution

Neopronouns: rhe/rhek/rhel/rhellis which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself.

Replace he with rhe

Replace him with rhek

Replace his with rhel

Replace himself with rhellis

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Rhe is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as rhe gets a fence

set up around rhel yard so the puppy can go outside without rhek having to walk it. Rhel uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting rhek use, since rhe lost rhel. Rhe's going to buy toys and train the puppy rhellis.”

045: Viva La Revolution

Suddenly shoved off the dragon's back, the had no time to brace rhellis before rhe slammed into the ground with enough force to violently knock the air from rhel lungs.

Pain burst all down rhel side where rhe'd landed, and not just from the fall. The sand rhe had landed on was burning hot. With rhel arms tied behind rhel back, rhe struggled to get to rhel feet, gasping in pain, rhel voice muffled through the cloth still tied over rhel mouth.

"Hey, be careful!" A voice shouted from somewhere above. A moment later a massive shadow fell over rhek again, and rhe felt the impact on the ground as another dragon landed practically on top of rhek, blogging out the sun with its shining red hide.

Two clawed hands, each the size of rhel head grabbed rhek around the middle before rhe had time to react, and then rhe was in the air again.

The dragon had barely taken two wingbeats upward before there came a metallic screech like clashing metal, and then the entire world was spinning and jarring as rhe was knocked violently loose from the red dragon's grip and sent slamming once more into the

burning sand.

Dragons were roaring and shrieking overhead, and the men were roaring right along with them, and rhe couldn't make out a single word. They were fighting over rhek, and where rhe should be placed, that much was clear. The red dragon had not wanted rhek to be left on the burning sand. The gold dragon's rider, the same man who had kidnapped rhek, clearly disagreed.

Rhe was not going to stick around to see who won the argument. Rhe had managed to stumble to rhel feet, hissing at the white hot pain as rhel bare feet touched the sand with all rhel weight on top.

Unable to see anything further than the small patch of sunlight rhe was in, rhe made for the direction that seemed to be the furthest from the fighting dragons overhead.

The shadows passed over rhek, but did nothing to ease the temperature of the sand. Then suddenly rhe found cool, solid stone beneath rhel, only slightly easing the burning lain in rhel feet.

Rhel eyes were adjusting to the darkness, so rhe found the first thing that looked like shelter, and leapt behind it. It was a large praised portion of rock like a counter, tall enough for rhek to crouch behind

to get the wright of rhes feet.

The sounds of the dragonfight were still raging over the crater, which, as rhes scanned the area, was so far rhes only known way of escaping the eyrie. There were no doorways or stairs or even other openings in the rock that rhes could see from rhes current position.

Rhes crawled to the furthest edge of rhes hiding spot and craned rhes neck to try and see if there was an escape rout across on the other side. But the sunlight stabbing down into the center opening was too bright, and rhes couldn't see past it.

And it was only then, as rhes stared hard at the sunlight, that rhes finally noticed the whole reason rhes had been brought here in the first place.

On the far side of the patch of sunlight, sparkling with dazzling reflections, was what was unmistakably a dragon's egg. The egg of the queen dragon, who rhes had been brought here to be soul-bonded with.

The dragonmen needed a new queen, and needed a rider for that queen, and they thought they could get one by assaulting rhes family's farm, kidnapping rhes, and treating rhes like some object,

less even than an animal.

The dragonmen had gotten used to the idea that they could bully and threaten people into doing whatever they wanted, with no consequences.

Rhe was going to prove them wrong.

046: 046

Neopronouns: Hero/heros/heroself which follow the same rules as it/its/itself.

Replace it with hero

Replace its with heros

Replace itself with heroself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Hero is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as hero gets a fence set up around heros yard so the puppy can go outside without hero having to walk it. Heros uncle is going to help set up the fence,

since he has a set of power tools he's letting hero use, since hero lost heros. Hero's going to buy toys and train the puppy heroself."

046: 046

The sky had been threatening a storm for over an hour, and, quite suddenly, it made good on that threat.

One moment, all Alpaen had to contend with was the wind, and the cold it bore with it. The next, the rain was coming sheeting down, sweeping visibly up the street like a malevolent spirit.

It struck hero all at once, slamming in to soak heros hair and clothes within moments of the downpour. Then the rain conspired with the wind to shock what felt like every last drop of warmth from heros bones.

Huddled into heroself as best as hero could, the stone below hero did nothing to help, its surface as cold as ice, sapping more warmth out of heroes legs even through the fabric of heros thick, fluffy pajama pants.

Alpaen had nowhere to go. No shelter to turn to. Hero had no friends, no one hero could trust. The abandoned buildings were once again being patrolled by cops to scare off the homeless, a category that now included hero, but now this time, there was nothing hero could do about it. Hero couldn't even help heroself, let alone anyone

else.

It would be at least three more days until hero's powers came back, and that was only if hero not only took Verdict at his word, but also trusted that vi knew what vi was talking about in the first place.

And why, exactly, did Verdict have any idea how Ferros' experiments worked, anyways? Since when did vi want anything to do with X? The last time hero had checked, just two weeks ago, Verdict had been trying to kill X. Desperately.

But then, maybe hero wasn't the first mutant Ferros had captured this month.

Maybe Verdict had had a very good reason for wanting to kill X, with so little regard for his own safety that vi'd almost died from his injuries trying to fight through what had seemed like an endless flood of Ferros' avatars. With his mutation, it was hard to tell what was happening under all those spikes and fur.

Maybe hero could take his word for it that, three days from now, hero'd be able to shapeshift at will again, and leave behind not only all the things hero hated about the body hero'd had to deal with since puberty, but all the new things hero wanted to stop being reminded

of every time hero looked at heroself.

Alpaen had been able to bear the unwanted changes from puberty while hero knew that as soon as the school bell rang, as soon as heros mom left the house, as soon as hero could lock heros door and know she wouldn't come beating it down demanding to be let in...hero could simply change heros body into the one hero desperately wanted.

It had been bearable, as long as hero knew that it wouldn't last. Hero had always had that reprieve to cling to, that relief.

But now that was gone, and so many worse things had swept in to take its place, and the only hope hero had left to cling to that hero would ever get it back was the word of a self-styled Villain.

There hadn't been any way to hide the fact that Alpaen'd been missing for five days. Even if heros mom had, by some miracle, not noticed heros absence, Springs Mill had. You couldn't just miss five days of school without anyone noticing.

Heros mom had called the police and reported hero missing, the first night. The cops of course had done nothing.

For the first few seconds after she walked in the door to their apartment to see Alpaen slumped on the couch, tiredly eating barely thawed frozen pancakes, for just a few seconds, maybe even a dozen heartbeats, she'd been relieved, through her shock. Overjoyed to see hero.

But then her brain had caught up to what her eyes were seeing.

--If you could project yourself back in time and stand invisibly in the room, you could actually watch and see the exact moment she took in the glowing green lines tracing over heros exposed skin, and the unmistakable metal knobs still protruding from heros arms and legs. The number stamped in bright white on the back of heroes left hand.

If you pulled aside any random kid on the street and asked them what all these details, combined with a sudden disappearance, meant, they'd be able to tell you, without a moment of hesitation: You were looking at a mutant who'd been captured, experimented on, and then released by Ferros.

And that would have fine, her knowing that hero was a mutant, knowing that hero'd been captured and tortured. She was very vocally pro mutant. Her older sister had been a mutant. She would probably have hired the best therapist money could buy if it was just

that her child was a mutant. And if that therapist didn't help she'd hire another one.

The problem was not heros mother finding out hero was a mutant. It wasn't that her child was going to need her help and support to recover from this ordeal.

No.

That wasn't the problem.

The problem was the realization that hero, her child, was Changeling, the city-designated villain who was openly trans and nonbinary lesbian, only answering to the ironic pronouns of hero/heros/heroself.

Changeling, who had brazenly robbed her company's CEO on live television in his own home, and had, along with dozens of other city-designated villains, declared outright war on the police and the city-designated heroes who were on their side.

She could forgive the assault and robbery of her CEO. She didn't really like him anyways, he was a misogynist and was always making lewd jokes. She could even forgive the fighting with the

cops. She had a love-hate relationship with the government, where she thought it was simultaneously too big when it wanted her to pay taxes so poor kids could eat lunch at school, but also not big enough when she wanted refugees to be hunted down and shoved back over the borders.

She could twist her paradoxical ideas about the police – too strong when they were giving her a speeding ticket in a school zone, too weak when they hadn't rounded up all the homeless people in the city and tossed them in jail yet – into a shape that let her convince herself that her child was only fighting them to stand up against injustices like speeding tickets and other traffic violations, things she cared about, and not that hero'd been fighting to defend the very same 'degenerates and predators' she wanted removed from the city streets. The homeless, the poor, the Queer, the people of color, the disabled...

No, she did not have a problem with hero fighting the cops.

But everyone knew that Changeling had been captured by Ferros. Several villain-cams had caught the altercation on film, and it had been shared through her favorite Neighborhood Watch groups.

Changeling going missing, and her child going missing, could have

been just a coincidence. But that was when she thought her child was a normal human, not a mutant.

She'd have had no problem if Alpaen was just a mutant. But hero wasn't. Hero was Changeling, the most flagrantly and proudly Queer villain on their side of the city.

And that she could not condone.

She had gone on a rant, raging and screaming so loudly that if their neighbors hadn't both been at work, the ovolume would have brought the police to their door.

Just because Alpaen (But she didn't say Alpaen, even though hero'd just told her heros chosen name, she deadnamed hero, and put stress on every pronoun to drive the hatred in like a knife between the ribs) was a mutant didn't mean hero wasn't the gender hero'd been assigned at birth. The words themselves were nothing but complimentary, but the voice was filled with scathing rage and hatred.

Heros body changing shape did not mean hero wasn't still the gender hero'd been assigned at birth. Just because heros body could changed didn't mean heros spirit was changing too.

Alpaen tried the best hero could to explain, that hero had always felt this way, even before hero'd developed the power to shapeshift, even before hero'd had the words “trans” and “nonbinary” to describe what hero was feeling.

But Alpaen's mom thought that hero was calling heroself nonbinary just because hero was a shapeshifter.

She didn't understand, nor did she care, that even in a world where no one had superpowers, where no one could change their shape except through surgery, even in a world where magic didn't exist, even in a universe where hero wasn't a shapeshifter or even a mutant, hero would still be nonbinary. Would still be transgender. Would still want to change heros body to match what hero felt it should look like in heros guts.

She had the cause and effect backwards. She thought hero was nonbinary because hero was a shapeshifter.

She didn't understand that if hero weren't nonbinary, the only shapeshifting hero would be doing would be hiding heros identity and for fighting.

If hero weren't nonbinary, hero would just be changing the color of

heros hair and tweaking heros voice and changing up the structure of heros facial bones and height, just enough that no one would recognize hero, even without heros amphibisona. Or just the more extreme things like growing wings when hero needed to fly, or squeezing through thin cracks under doors.

Alpaen had figured out hero was nonbinary long before hero manifested the mutation that let hero shapeshift. But no amount of begging or pleading or crying had let hero convince heros mom of any of that. Hero'd wanted to shout at her, but she'd just shouted hero down every time, all but literally covering her ears for what hero had to say.

Hero'd been kicked out without any chance to grab any of heros things.

All hero had now were the clothes on heros back, and that didn't amount to much – just heros favorite, worn out hoodie, and fluffy pajama pants. Both had leopard pattern spots, in slightly different shades of brown and yellow, since they were from different brands and bought years apart. Hero'd owned the hoodie so long, and worn it so often, that the elbows were bare threads. It had long since outlived its ability to keep hero warm, but Alpaen hadn't ever been able to work up the heart to throw it away, no matter how many

times hero was nagged or made fun of about it by heros mom, teachers, or classmates.

Alpaen hadn't even been allowed to bring heros shoes. Heros mom had just laughed in heros face and told hero that if hero didn't want to go without shoes, then hero should use heros nonbinary freak powers to grow some new ones.

She knew just as well as anyone by this point that mutants who were captured by Ferros couldn't use their powers for several days afterward, if they ever regained the ability to use their powers in the first place.

Some people never got them back.

Hero had only heros socks to keep heros feet warm, and they were already soaked through with rain.

To put it simply: Alpaen was freezing cold, soaking wet, had no friends or family to stay with, hadn't eaten anything in five days except what Verdict had given hero, and the single Pop-Tart hero'd eaten at home before being discovered and kicked out, and to make all these things even worse, the library, where hero'd thought hero'd at least be able to find temporary shelter from the elements, was

closed.

Alpaen would only learn this later, but while hero had been locked away in Ferros' lab, there'd been an attempted shooting at the library. The only reason nobody had died was because one of the librarians had secretly been Javelina, and she'd been able to take down the would-be gunman before he could fire on anyone.

Then the police had shown up, and instead of arresting the shooter, decided that Javelina was holding the library hostage, despite all the protests of the regular people inside, Javelina, and even the shooter himself.

The whole horrific event had only ended when Bulldozer and several other as-yet-unnamed city-designated villains surrounded and killed the police, and teleported the victims, including Javelina, away to safety so they could get home, or wherever they needed to go, without having to parade in front of the news cameras.

Hero had noticed, if only subconsciously, that the roads for several blocks leading up to the library were emptied of cars, and no one seemed to be home. The city rulers had decided to react to the incident by arresting, or at least trying to arrest, everyone who'd witnessed it in person, or even just been in the general vicinity. To

“prevent the spread of false news designed to invoke distrust in the police”, they said.

If Alpaen's mom hadn't come home right when she did, Alpaen would have been able to see a recap of the story on the news, but fate had it that heros mom had come home and just the right time for hero to miss the memo that the shelter offered by the library was no longer available.

This meant that Alpaen had to spend almost an entire hour sitting alone, cold and miserable beyond words, on the freezing steps of the library in the rain, heros body wracked with sobs as hero finally cried with the tsunami of emotions that had built up over the past week.

This also meant, though, that when the dark red minivan turned the corner at the end of the street and began to approach, the headlights shone on Alpaen, so that when hero looked up, hero had to lift a hand to shield heros eyes from the glare.

And the person inside the car saw the telltale signs of Ferros' mistreatment, glowing neon green even in headlamps, seeming brighter still in its contrast against Alpaen's dark brown skin.

All of the events proceeding these moments meant that when that minivan pulled up in front of the steps leading up to the library, and the door on the side pulled open, Alpaen was sitting there, tired, cold, in pain, drenched, and desperate for any help.

At first hero couldn't see anything inside the car, then someone clicked the overhead light on, and hero was met with a familiar sight – one hero hadn't been expecting.

“You look like you could use some help. Want a lift?” Verdict, in vir full costume and mask, asked, voice pitched to be audible over the pounding of the rain.

Vi was sitting in the middle section of the van, leaning towards the open door across the armrest. Vir usual horns were notably missing – Alpaen could only assume they were too tall to fit in the car without gouging the roof. An unfamiliar person was sitting in the driver's seat, features obscured under a hoodie and lower face mask, staying facing forward, head turning slowly to scan the two empty roads on either side. A large yellow beach towel had been draped over the seat inside the open door.

For a few seconds, Alpaen stared at that open door, and the shelter offered by it. Waves of warmth were fighting their way free through

the rain, just barely touching the tip of heros nose before being dashed away by the downpour.

It took a few long heartbeats of sitting, freezing and shivering in the rain, for hero to decide that the reasons to trust Verdict far outweighed the reasons not to.

Verdict had set up camp at Ferros' dumping grounds, and had been the first friendly face hero had seen (or rather, not seen, hidden behind vir draconic mask) since hero'd been kidnapped days before.

Vi had given hero the first food hero'd had since Ferros had grabbed hero. It hadn't been much – a few scrambled eggs and some toast, cooked over vir very own fire in vir camp at the edge of the clearing – but the food, and the compassion and caring literally baked into it, had been enough to ensure that Alpaen could get all the way home, driven there in this very car, without simply collapsing into a singularity of despair.

Alpaen had thought hero could trust heros mom, but she had betrayed hero, cast hero aside like hero was worth nothing.

Hero had never expected to find any ally in Verdict, the self-proclaimed Villain with a capital V.

But vi was the one who had waited for hero to be released, and vi was the one who was here now, offering shelter, and not just from the rain.

Vi had made this offer earlier, when vir mysterious friend had first driven hero home from the woods. If heros secret identity was revealed, if heros family wasn't accepting, or if hero needed help, hero could come to vir. Vi could offer food, clothing, and a place to sleep and spend the day, far enough away from the prying eyes of the cops that if hero didn't want to be found, it would be, not impossible, but more effort than most people would be willing to put in to figure out where hero'd gone.

Probably, vi had said, the only one who would be able to track hero would be Ferros Xself. Vi had been wearing vir full costume then, too, so Alpaen hadn't been able to see if vi had a matching scar on vir upper arm – the glowing purple circle that marked the tracker Ferros placed in each of X victims.

No one had been able to remove them without irreparably damaging themselves, not even those whose mutation gave them the ability to heal at a faster rate. Trying to remove the tracker didn't just damage your arm – it wreaked havoc on your whole nervous system.

And that was if you could muster up the guts to try and get it removed in the first place.

Alpaen had spent the last few hours trying not to think about the tracker embedded in heros arm. Thinking about it for too long, and thinking about removing it, in particular, caused a surge of irrational panic and anxiety in the victim that was impossible to resist.

Hero had gotten a good enough look at heros when Ferros had implanted it, along with the number X had assigned Alpaen. X gave all X victims numbers. No one knew who the first few victims had been. People had only started coming forward after number 008.

Marked directly under the transmitter, glowing burning green against heros dark skin, was the number “046”. Which meant there were at least 45 victims who'd come before hero, and who knew how many who would come after.

Did Verdict have the number 045 marked on vir arm, hidden under that armour?

Hero wasn't going to ask. Vi was still waiting for Alpaen's answer to vir offer of...what was so much more than a ride, still leaning across the seat, vir eyeless mask as impassive as ever. But hero didn't need

to be a mind reader to know that vi wanted Alpaen to say yes. Vi wanted to help.

And there weren't any good reasons for hero to say no. Hero had nowhere else to go, no one else to turn to. Heros mom had disowned hero. The cops would, at best, toss hero in jail for loitering before even asking any questions. All of the official homeless shelters in the city had been shut down or burned down, and the unofficial ones were slowly being pressed out of existence.

Alpaen had to struggle to get to heros feet, the cold numbing heros hands and feet and making heros joints slow and uncooperative. Hero couldn't even feel heros fingers anymore. But hero made it down the stairs, into the van, and into the towel-draped seat without incident. The difference in temperature was immediate, warmth enveloping hero before hero'd even sat down.

Alpaen went to drag the van door shut with one numb hand, only to be met with resistance. But before hero could yank again in frustration, Verdict held out a hand, and said, “Just give it a moment, it's automatic. Pull it again, just a little, and let go. It'll shut on its own.”

Alpaen did as instructed, and watched in bafflement as the car door slowly slid its way shut and securely latched itself.

Hero let heroself fall back against the seat in sudden exhaustion, and tiredly pulled the seatbelt across and clicked it into place.

“We're buckled and ready to go.” Verdict said. The person in the driver's seat nodded, and only then did the car begin to move, pulled away from the stairs and back onto the road, performing a very illegal U-turn to get back the way they'd come. Alpaen didn't think there was anyone in the abandoned houses to notice or care.

Heros hands began to prickle with pins and needles as they regained feeling. Hero knew heros face would soon follow where the wind had bitten at hero's cheeks and nose. Hero hadn't even been allowed to take any of heros covid masks when hero'd been kicked out, a fact that was abruptly beating a dent into heros self-possession.

Homeless, cold, hungry, tired, in pain, and in a car with people without a mask.

“Sorry.” Alpaen managed to bite out, fighting with all heros strength not to start crying again.

Verdict didn't seem to understand what hero was apologizing for, because vi replied, "Don't be, this van has handled a lot worse than some rainwater." Then vi added, "It'll be about an hour until we get where we're going, and you'll be able to change out of those wet clothes when we get there, but if you're comfortable with it and trust me, I can offer a flame to help dry them now. It won't harm you, it promises not to, but some people are too afraid of fire to get to know it. Would you like to see it now before you make up your mind? You can always change your mind later."

Heros eyelids were starting to feel heavy, heros bones seeming to want to drag hero down into the core of the Earth as well-earned exhaustion began to take over heros body. But hero was still awake enough to follow what Verdict was saying, and understand what vi was offering.

"I'll take one." hero said. Hero didn't need any demonstration, hero'd already seen vir flames too many times to count. Hero knew they wouldn't do anything to hurt anyone vi didn't want them to. And if vi wanted to hurt hero, vi had had plenty of opportunities to do it before now that wouldn't ruin the upholstery of vir fancy car with automatic doors.

“Say the word and I'll desummon it immediately.” Verdict instructed, then lifted a hand, fingers pressed together. Vi drew them apart, and a small, round yellow flame drew itself into existence with the movement. It hovered over her hand for a few seconds, swirling into itself, casting yellow and orange flickering shadows over the walls and ceiling.

Then it began to uncurl itself, growing bigger as it did so, until it was in a form that was unmistakably that of a cat, Verdict's other hand going up to support its back feet.

“Hold your hands out to create a platform, and it can come to you.” Vi said. Alpaen obeyed, mesmerized by the way the flames moved. As Hero watched, Hero could have sworn that rosettes were visible, flickering at the surface of the fire, each one lasting only a few moments before it was gone.

The touch of the flame's paw on Hero's hand was not burning hot, the way Hero's mind had expected it to be despite all Hero's rationality arguing that it wouldn't hurt. It was not hot enough to burn, but it was warm.

Hero didn't know how to pick up the flame other than hold Hero's hands flat the way Verdict was, but luckily the flame had ideas of its

own, and easily hopped down off heros hands and onto heros lap, where it curled up into a cat-shaped ball.

The flame didn't purr, not like a real cat would have, but it did radiate warmth in every direction, and that was just as welcome. Hero could practically feel the water evaporating out of heros clothes one drop at a time.

Alpaen wasn't consciously aware of closing heros eyes, the only thing hero knew, or cared about at that moment, was that hero was warm, hero was safe, and more than anything else, hero was tired.

Hero slept, and the car drove on in silence into the dark.

047: The Perfect Creation

Neopronouns: ama/ranth/amarris, ki/kir/kirris, and fir/nix/firris, which all follow the same rules as it/its/itself

Replace it with ama, ki, or fir

Replace its with ranth, kir, or nix

Replace itself with amarris, kirris, or firris

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Ama is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ama gets a fence set up around ranth yard so the puppy can go outside without ama having to walk it. Ranth uncle is going to help set up the fence,

since he has a set of power tools he's letting ama use, since ama lost ranth. Ama's going to buy toys and train the puppy amarris."

or

"Ki is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ki gets a fence set up around kir yard so the puppy can go outside without ki having to walk ki. Kir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting ki use, since ki lost kir. ki's going to buy toys and train the puppy kirris."

or

"Fir is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as fir gets a fence set up around nix yard so the puppy can go outside without fir having to walk it. Nix uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting fir use, since fir lost Nix. Fir's going to buy toys and train the puppy firris."

047: The Perfect Creation

Ki was extremely strange being in the lab all by amarris. Ki had never happened before – ki just wasn't allowed. You always had to have a partner, who always had to be within line of sight, range of hearing, and range of telepathic field, to make sure that if something went wrong (When something went wrong, more like, at least so the rumors said), at least one person would be able to help (or get help, if the problem was beyond their capabilities to deal with).

Ki was against every single one of the rules for Gofde to be here by amarris, and ama felt ki in ranth pounding heart with every echoing step ama took.

But ama didn't have any other choice. There was no one else ama could trust with this. The others in ranth lab group would rather die than break the rules. And more importantly, they'd rather kill than break the rules.

Ama wasn't. Sometimes, the rules were wrong. Sometimes the rules did nothing but cause more problems than they solved. Sometimes the rules not only needed to be bent, they needed to be twisted until they broke.

Gofde wasn't supposed to be here. Ama was supposed to be in ranth quarters, performing the cleansing rituals that would purify ranth tools for tomorrow.

Ama didn't understand how the rest of ranth lab partners could think that what they were doing was okay, and not something they needed to fight back against and stop.

Their assignment was to build a living being – a sentient being – out of combined Academy-approved cybernetic technologies, and the small collection of organic samples they'd each been assigned at random.

They had to build the being by themselves, with only the materials that'd been provided, then teach ki to read and write, and then have ki write, without assistance, a poem of at least ten keyeros, well enough to be graded a rank from Herin to Kada, with the grade determined by the level of self-awareness displayed as well as the appreciation for the aesthetic properties of Academy-approved poetry. Any lower of a grade, and they would fail, their creation would be immediately recycled, and they'd have to restart from the very beginning.

This was Gofde's first attempt at the assignment, now that ama was at a high enough rank to take it, but almost everyone in ranth class was on at least their second attempt. Many were on their third or fourth. The oldest was on vir 30th attempt.

Most people passed by their tenth attempt.

If they passed, their creation was sent on to the higher levels, where the masters would carefully dissect and catalogue ki.

The archive's goal was to collect as many paths to sentience as possible, to find the one that would work every time, with a 100% success rate.

Because even if you followed the instructions of one of the templates exactly, there was no guarantee that the resulting creation would obtain sentience. Even with two creations, exactly alike in every physical way, sometimes one would be sentient, but the other wouldn't.

This was why the endless tests were run, generation after generation. Everyone who had graduated the Academy had proven themselves by supplying another template to the Academy's archive.

Each sample was a step closer to the end goal, one step closer to making ki possible, with confidence, to create sentience any time you needed or wanted to.

No more wasting funds paying for thousands of lab workers to, in the end, only produce ten sentient creatures fit for the task they'd been designed for. Instead, contractors would be able to buy as many sentients as they needed for the job, hand-tailored to perfectly fit the environment and labor required.

And that was supposed to be enough of a end-reward that no one would think twice about murdering the very people they were creating in the first place.

Well, no matter how many lectures ama sat through, no matter how many commercials ama watched, ki wasn't good enough for Gofde.

There was no way in all the levels of hell that ama was going to kill Ofdyl just because the Academy demanded ki.

Ofdyl was a person – a real person – and fir didn't deserve to die just so the archive could get one step closer to selling sentience. Ki wasn't fair, ki wasn't right, and Gofde wasn't going to go along with ki!

If they had to run away together and leave everything ama'd known behind, then they would.

That's why ama was here, breaking the rules by coming alone, without telling anyone else ahead of time.

The after-hours password to ranth lab space didn't carry any physical weight in ranth identification marks, but ki felt like ki did. Gofde's arm was itching, and maybe ki was just nerves, but the unsettling thought that maybe there really was some truth to that age-old rumor that the markings could detect when you were breaking the law kept creeping up on ama. Something about this just felt unnerving. But ama believed in ranth cause, and wasn't going to let a little something like nerves stop ama now.

Ama quickened ranth step, ranth backpack thumping heavily against ranth back with the faster pace, and finally reached the door with ranth name sleepily blinking on the placard above the doorframe.

As Gofde approached, the door woke up, building three eyes to look down at ama with on long grey tendrils.

Ama held up ranth arm for ki to scan ranth markings, and the door said nothing the entire time, not even to confirm ranth clearance. Ki

simply opened the door, then unbuilt the eyes, sinking back into the doorframe to watch ama silently from above.

This door had never caused problems before, and ki seemed like that wasn't going to change now.

But ki was disquieting that ki wasn't saying anything at all – ki should have at least expressed some surprise to see ama here so late at night, so clearly after hours, when no one was supposed to be here, whether ranth marking said ama had clearance or not. Maybe even should have given a warning of some kind. Didn't the doors have a responsibility to report unlawful behavior?

But the door said nothing, and after a moment of hesitation, Gofde stepped through without incident, half been expecting ki to slam shut on top of ama.

Ki didn't.

Gofde didn't know whether to be reassured by that or not.

The room was so dimly lit the lights almost seemed to be off, only giving Gofde the ability to maneuver without hitting any of the tables or shelves because of practice, and the barest hint of light

reflecting off of all the metal surfaces. Mostly, it was practice. Ama had spent every day of the last few months in this lab.

And besides, the darkness couldn't be helped--Ofdyl was extremely photosensitive, nix large, nocturnally-adapted eyes painfully burned by even the smallest of lights. Gofde had been forced to even cover the skylight set into the high ceiling, which had required getting help from four of the mobile maintenance units to properly position the plate.

The lack of sunlight available during the workday had been a drain on Gofde's energy, so ama'd had to start taking extra days off to recover, but ama thought ki was worth ki if ki meant protecting Ofdyl.

Fir was watching ama from nix cage on the opposite wall, sitting back against the far side, nix eyes glowing deep red out of the darkness from the light still shining in from the door. Gofde'd forgotten to order ki shut.

But that would just be a waste of time tonight.

Tonight, Ofdyl was leaving nix cage, for both the first and the last time.

Ki suddenly occurred to Gofde just as ama was reaching for the keypanel on the cage what ki meant that this would be the first time Ofdyl left nix cage.

Gofde spent all day walking and running around – but there was only enough space in the cage for Ofdyl to pace a few steps before fir had to stop and turn around, and fir'd never been as energetic as some of the other creations ama'd seen. Mostly fir spent nix time sitting in the back corners, or lying down when fir was asleep.

Would fir even be able to keep up with Gofde once they started moving? Or, if fir could, would fir be strong enough to make ki the entire way? Nix cage was small, and the larger lab space alone, just outside this door, was thousands of times larger. And that was before they even hit the ramps or the outer spaces.

Gofde hesitated, hand hovering above the scanner that would open the door, doubts swarming in for the first time since ama'd formed this plan, unease pickling against ranth skin again like little knives. Maybe ama should just turn back now before it was too late. Figure out some other way of getting Ofdyl away.

What if Ofdyl was just too weak to run that far?

“Euruv?”

Ofdyl's voice wasn't fully charged back from using ki all day, so ki was almost too soft to hear.

Gofde, spurred on by the anxiety washing over ama, held up a shushing hand and hurried to reassure fir. Ofdyl wasn't likely to panic and cause a scene, but ama didn't want to take any chances. “Yes, ki's me, my peryk, ki's Euruv.”

That particular name from Ofdyl's voice felt sour and ill-fitting, as ki had felt for a while now, but now was not the time to waste any time explaining why Ofdyl shouldn't use that word for ama anymore. There would be plenty of time for that later, after they'd gotten safely away.

Ofdyl had so much to learn about the world. So much that fir would never get a chance to learn if fir stayed here, whether or not fir was smart enough to pass the exams.

(And Gofde knew fir was. Fir was the most amazing sentient ever created by Veylein hands. And fir had been created by ranth hands. Fir was ranth. Ranth beloved creation. The perfect creation.)

Ama held up ranth markings for the cage's scanner to access before any more time could be wasted on questions or explanations or hesitations, and the door swung silently inward. Ofdyl was already in the furthest corner from the door, or fir would have been forced to move that way to avoid being hit as ki swung past. Safety measures to prevent any accidental escapes.

“Come, quickly and quietly, Ofdyl, we don't have time to waste.” Gofde said in a whisper, gesturing urgently for fir to follow ama.

For a few seconds, Ofdyl just stared out at ama from the back of the cage, nix large, round eyes like liquid night.

For another moment, Gofde thought ranth plan was failing before ki had even got off the ground. Ama would not be able to support Ofdyl's weight if fir got too tired to walk, even if fir helped – there was no way ama'd be able to get fir out if fir wasn't willing.

Ama opened ranth mouth again to urge fir to hurry, but fir was by that time moving, with a sudden rush of energy ama hadn't been expecting.

Ofdyl lurched out of the cage head first, and almost crashed to the floor, just barely managing to catch nirris in time, then stood,

wobbling on nix own two legs, fully upright for the first time in nix existence, since the cage wasn't tall enough to accommodate nix height. Only by lying down on nix side could fir stretch out.

Now there were no more bars blocking nix movements.

Gofde examined nix balance critically, anxious that what appeared to be good luck would suddenly disappear, and fir would lose nix strength and sink to the ground.

But fir stayed standing, even managed to take a few steps by nirris without falling, reaching out for the table in the center of the room for support.

Fir then spoke without turning to face Gofde, and ama wondered if that was because fir didn't trust nix balance to turn around just yet. Nix voice, just like before, was almost too soft to hear, the batteries clearly running on the lower side. They would have been charged overnight while fir slept, but ranth plans had interrupted that cycle. So nix voice came softly, "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere safe." Ama replied, too busy with the sudden remembrance of the backpack ama wore, and kir vital contents, to explain more fully.

Ama swung the backpack around so that ama could reach inside, and pulled out the hastily put-together snow mask ama'd spent the last few days making in ranth off time. Ama held it out for Ofdyl to inspect, though fir was still turned away. “Here, put this on, ki should help protect your eyes from the light.”

This time Ofdyl did turn, and Gofde approached and stood on tiptoes to fit the mask down over nix obediently lowered head.

The mask slid into place with a perfect fit, locking into place against the interfaces on nix lower jaw, just as ama'd planned.

The metal was in the same jale color as nix three natural horns, and Gofde had, in a fit of aesthetic, adorned the mask with two more matching horns for the front, so that now Ofdyl looked like fir was wearing a crown of spikes around the hundreds of tiny ports and interfaces on the top of nix head.

The face of the mask kirris was blank metal, with only two thin vertical slits that fit directly over the center of Ofdyl's eyes. Like the snow-goggles used by those who lived in the coldest regions, the thin openings would block out most of the light. Hopefully, this would prevent Ofdyl from being overwhelmed by the brighter lights outside this room.

The door was still open, leading the way out of the darkness with a shaft of light that reflected off of what Gofde could just barely see of Ofdyl's eyes beneath the mask.

And suddenly there was something ominous in the way Ofdyl was staring at ama, something disquieting that ama had never noticed before, not while fir was still in the cage, safely separated and contained.

There was a menace there now, rather than the simple obedience and despairing resignation ama'd grown accustomed to. And it wasn't just ranth nervousness about this whole venture, either, ama realized with a sinking heart.

Ofdyl was mildly telepathic, and Gofde knew, suddenly knew like it was a fact, that ama was feeling this sudden dread because Ofdyl's thoughts had turned in a way that did not bode well for ama. Maybe Ofdyl had always felt this way about ama, but it had been blotted out by all the other telepathic touches that were active in the lab during the day.

Ama tried to quash the sudden alarm, tried to at least pretend not to notice, hoping that if ama just stayed calm this sudden surge of...whatever ki was would fade, but didn't succeed.

When ama spoke, ranth voice did not come out as calm and cool as ama wanted ki to. Ki shook, and ama even stumbled a little as ama took a step backward through no conscious decision of ranth rational mind. “Come on, we've got to leave this place.” And then added, desperately trying to regain control of ranth own emotions, “I'm going to bring you somewhere safe. Somewhere you won't be poked and prodded anymore.”

Ofdyl said nothing for a few moments, just continued to watch ama with that same tense posture that was making all ranth instincts scream 'run'. Maybe it hadn't been nerves to begin with. Maybe, even from the other side of the building, ama had been sensing Ofdyl's hostility.

And suddenly Ofdyl did speak, but nix voice was so quiet, Gofde couldn't even make anything out besides the word “euruv” at the end before the speakers on the sides of nix face abruptly failed entirely, giving one last beep to signal that the batteries were fully drained.

And still that feeling of dread was coiling deeper inside ranth stomach, like a snake preparing to strike.

Ama took another step back, then tried to pretend that ki was on purpose as ama turned to face the door and began to stride toward ki

like this was all according to plan and like ama wasn't resisting the urge to run for ranth life from the monster ama'd so foolishly let out of nix cage.

No, no. Ama desperately corrected amarris, Ofdyl isn't a monster. Fir didn't belong in a cage. Fir was ranth peryk, ranth perfect creation – the perfect creation. Fir wasn't like the other experiments, fir wasn't disposable. Fir was ranth.

“Don't call me Euruv anymore, Ofdyl.” Gofde managed to say, in an almost normal tone of voice, as ama stepped out past the threshold of the door.

Ama didn't look back to see if Ofdyl was following ama, but ama hadn't been able to help but glance up at the door as ama walked below ki.

Ki was watching ama again, following ranth movements from within the frame as ama kept walking, then stopped a few paces away. Gofde had never had cause before now to think of this silent regard as ominous or hateful, but now ama couldn't think of any other way to describe ki. There was a malevolence in that multi-eyed gaze, and ama didn't know how ama'd never noticed it before.

The door blinked down at ama as ama stared up at ki, and then, like a physical jolt to the heart, another spike of fear rushed through ama, stronger and more urgent than the others.

Ki felt like ki took forever for Gofde to turn ranth head around to look back at the door. Like time had slowed to a stop and was crawling by, moment by moment inside a single heartbeat, letting ama take all the time ama needed to understand exactly what was happening.

The first thing ranth eyes found were the door, no longer blinking. Instead, ki had expanded the panel outward, and rather than displaying ranth own name, ki now read, in the text style designated for when you were translating on behalf of someone else, “My name is Delfor.”

Delfor. The first round of experimentation. The designation ama had assigned Ofdyl before ama'd realized how special fir was, how perfect and amazing and different fir was. Delfor wasn't a name. It was a lab designation. It was for experiments – objects – not people.

Ama'd given fir the name Ofdyl, a name that should have been reserved for ranth first hatched child, so that fir would know how much fir mattered to ama. So that fir would know fir was more than

just an experiment. That fir was different. Fir didn't belong here. That someday, fir would be free.

The door was translating for Ofdyl, somehow. Why would Ofdyl want to go back to that objectifying designation over the name ama had given fir, of ranth own bloodline?

The idea was so startling and offensive, for half a fraction of a moment, Gofde forgot to be scared.

But only then did ranth eyes fall lower, to watch, moment by moment, as Ofdyl emerged from the shadows behind the door, moving at full speed, head lowered so those horns, those beautiful horns ama had so generously gifted fir, were pointed squarely at ama. And ama knew fear once again.

Gofde knew how sharp those horns were. Ama had spent the last few months doing nothing but running tests on Ofdyl to not only teach fir the required information, but to catalogue every feature and trait that developed.

Those horns were sharp enough, and strong enough, to pierce ranth hide without a problem, and probably, if Ofdyl had all nix weight behind the charge, shatter straight through ranth endoskeleton.

There would be nothing stopping Ofdyl from killing ama.

And ama was going to have to watch ki in this horrible slow-motion ranth panicking system had forced ama into in a vain attempt to save ranth life.

Ama shouldn't have worried about whether or not Ofdyl would be able to keep up when they started moving to make their escape.

Fir was moving fast enough all on nix own to kill ama, after all.

048: The First Sign

Neopronouns: mie/mym/myr/mirs/mirself, which follow the same rules as a combination of he/him and she/her:

he/him/his/hers/herself

Replace he with mie

Replace him with mym

Replace his with myr

Replace hers with mirs

Replace himself with mirself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Mie is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as mie gets a fence set up around myr yard so the puppy can go outside without mym having to walk it. Myr uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting mym use, since mie lost mirs. Mie's going to buy toys and train the puppy mirself."

And vi/vir/vis/virself, which will follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this story.

Replace he with vi

Replace him with vir

Replace his with vis

Replace himself with virself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's

going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Vi is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as vi gets a fence set up around vis yard so the puppy can go outside without vir having to walk it. Vis uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting vir use, since vi lost vis. Vi's going to buy toys and train the puppy virself."

048: The First Sign

Mie woke suddenly from a very vivid dream about chasing a flufftail up a tree, and for a few moments, floundered in confusion at finding myself firmly on the ground rather than digging my claws into the thick bark of a tree. The smell of the dried fall leaves was thick under my nose, jarring after the sweet, sticky scent of the sap that had welled up under my claws.

My heart had already been pounding from the excitement of the dream – mie had been so close to catching the flufftail, it had been just a few paw lengths away and mie'd been preparing for what would have been the final pounce – but now it was racing from fear.

My instincts were screaming at my not to move, so mie stayed where mie was, crouching, frozen on the forest floor, in my favorite sleeping spot beneath the roots of one of the hard trees, what mie had always thought of as a safe place to hide and relax.

Mie hoped that would continue to be true.

Mie wasn't even sure what had woken my up in the first place, all mie knew was that something horrible had happened.

The rest of the forest seemed to be in agreement, because everything but the wind, which feared nothing, had fallen silent. The pounding of myr heart was suddenly the loudest thing in the world.

Then the noise came again, the noise that, in myr dreaming state, had thought was the alarm call of the flufftail mie was chasing.

It was unlike anything mie had heard before, piercing and sudden, like claw to the heart, then silent. It certainly felt like myr heart wanted to leap out of myr chest with it.

Mie could feel all of of myr fur was standing on end, and instinctively, mie found mirself backing up until mie felt myr back legs touch the wall of roots, then pressed mirself against it as far as mie could, trying to get as far away from the opening as mie could.

And suddenly there was a dark shape blacking out the faint light in the opening, and mie thought myr heart was going to stop. Then a warm weight slammed into myr side, and Zuma's familiar scent, reeking with fear, filled myr nose, vir heartbeat joining myr own.

Neither of them said anything, and a moment later, the sound struck a third time, this time followed by a deep rumble they could feel in their bones, trembling through the tree they hid under, sending the

two pressing even closer together in the darkness.

The rumble, like a growl from the land itself, continued like it was never going to end.

It went on for so long, with no other disaster threatening, that mie felt mirself slowly, against myr will, starting to relax, too exhausted from the adrenaline rush to keep up the heightened state of fear.

Eventually, Zuma fell asleep.

Mie stayed awake through the entire night, keeping watch for the both of them, unable to relax myr mind no matter how myr tired body became.

When the sunlight began to filter in through the narrow opening under the tree, the deep noise was still growling out like the entire world was angry, and mie couldn't help but fear that it would never stop.

Eventually myr exhaustion overcame mym, and mie fell into a fitful sleep, resting myr head on Zuma's flank, with vir half-concious purr not blocking out the growling of the land, but at least offering a counterpoint.

049: An Inconvenient Haunting

Neopronouns: nae/nym/nyr/nymself which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with nae

Replace him with nym

Replace his with nyr

Replace himself with nymself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Nae is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as nae gets a fence

set up around nyr yard so the puppy can go outside without nym having to walk it. Nyr uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting nym use, since nae lost nyr. Nae's going to buy toys and train the puppy nymself."

049: An Inconvenient Haunting

Nae tapped nervously on the desk with jittery fingers as nae stared at the notification for a message that had just come in through nyr SocialHub's message center. From the icon, nae could tell it had been forwarded by nyr account on the Ghost Hunters For Hire network.

Nae was afraid to find out what nae would find when nae clicked it. Nae dithered and procrastinated for a few more seconds, turning nyr office chair into a slow spin, but when nae finally came back around to facing the desk in front of the screen again, nae knew nae had to click it.

It was a BF-PM from Maelvywin, which was a relief. SocialHub didn't yet allow you to distinguish between private messages sent by best friends, and other types of messages, but apparently they were working on it and hoped to release the update next month.

But, when nae clicked to open the message, nae was both disappointed – and relieved, on another level – that nyr friend was not just messaging to say hi or to update nym on her garden. No, Maelvywin had heard from another friend that they'd had trouble with ghosts two years ago, back when they first started appearing,

and they'd gotten help from The Hartgraves, a pair of freelance experts in the supernatural who operated within a pretty big area, which included nyr house.

They were good at what they did, according to Maelvywin's friend, and they hadn't charged anything at all for their services once Kar (Maelvywin's friend) explained their rocky financial situation.

The Hartgraves had taken care of both of the ghosts that had started haunting their neighborhood, and had apparently made sure that no more hauntings would occur there. None had ever since, but, Maelvywin cautioned, that could just be random luck. No one knew how ghosts or hauntings worked yet.

Not officially, at least, nae thought to nymself. Nae'd heard rumors – as everyone had – that ghosts had been around for a lot longer than two years, but just so rarely that if they were reported, everyone just thought it was a hoax or a local legend that was just for fun.

(These rumors were always followed by scathing comments that there had been plenty of hauntings before 2165. It was just that they always happened in low-income communities where the majority of people were people of color, so none of the rich white people had given enough shits to acknowledge the problem, let alone do

anything about it. These people always said it was no coincidence that the first “Official” ghost haunting had taken place in a rich white man's mansion.)

Nae wasn't sure what to think of the rumors, but nae trusted Maelvywin's judgement, and if she said she trusted Kar's judgement, nae was going to, too.

Maelvywin's message said she would send another once she'd found the Hartgrave's contact information for nym, since it changed depending on where they were at the time.

Knowing nae'd have to wait, nae grabbed nyr cup, and pushed backward away from the desk, trying to get the chair to roll as far as possible under its own momentum. When it rolled to a stop on the smooth wooden floor, nae used nyr good leg to push it further, aiming for the water cooler that, for some reason, nae'd decided to put on the far side of the room from where nae sat.

Then again, nae'd set up nyr office space before this mess with nyr knee began, so, though nae couldn't really remember, nae was pretty sure nae'd been thinking something along the lines of “it'll be good exercise for us to walk to the cooler and back during the day so we aren't sitting the whole time”.

Cool in theory, not so much in practice now that nae couldn't walk even a few steps without nyr knee buckling under nyr weight.

Rolling across the room in the office chair was inconvenient and time consuming, because the wheels didn't really want to spin freely, and nae had to push nymself backwards and hope nae didn't run into the water cooler.

But eventually nae made it, without knocking the cooler over, and refilled nyr travel mug to the top, drank enough that nyr mouth wasn't dry anymore, then filled the mug again.

And now came the more difficult part – getting back to the desk without spilling the water. Nae'd misplaced the lid at some point. Or maybe the ghost had stolen it. They seemed to enjoy taking nyr things.

Getting back to the desk took twice as long as leaving it, but nae eventually arrived, no water spilled, but nyr good leg – or maybe, nae should start saying 'better' leg – was starting to ache again, which meant the pain medication nae'd taken was starting to wear off.

Relying on nyr better leg to push nyr chair around nyr office wasn't the only way nae'd been leaning more weight on it than usual since nyr knee was hurt, and all of the added stress was taking its toll.

Nae'd been hoping that Maelvywin would have gotten back to nym by the time nae got back to the desk, but was disappointed to see that nyr inbox was still empty.

Less disappointing, though, was the absolutely adorable and hilarious picture that one of nyr other friends had forwarded to nyr SocialHub page of two kittens playfighting, with the picture taken at just the right moment so that their expressions were so emotive nae couldn't help but laugh out loud when nae saw it.

With it came a link to more “Verified Cute” (by people, nae was assured, who actually understood animal body language and wouldn't post pictures where animals were in danger or distress as though it was funny or heartwarming) animal pictures and videos.

Glancing once more at nyr inbox to check that it was still empty, nae decided to follow the link. Nae had time to kill, and nae might as well kill it having fun.

Nae reached for nyr mug to get another drink – and nyr hand met empty air. For a shocked moment, nae simply stared at the empty spot on nyr desk where nyr mug had been two seconds before. Nae'd seen it out of the corner of nyr eye.

And now it was gone. Vanished without a trace.

Nae closed nyr eyes and sighed out through nyr nose, trying to keep from screaming in frustration. That had been nyr last cup in the whole house. The ghost had already taken the rest of them. And had started taking the bowls, too.

Nae spent a minute doing breathing exercises, then resolutely opened nyr eyes again and clicked the link.

Hopefully Maelvywin would get back to nym soon with the contact information for The Hartgraves.

Otherwise nae was going to have to start buying bottled water.

050: A Wasted Chance

Neopronouns: ghou/ghouls/ghoulself which follow the same rules as it/its/itself for this example.

Replace it with ghou

Replace its with ghouls

Replace itself with ghouself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Ghou is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ghou gets a fence set up around ghouls yard so the puppy can go outside without ghou having to walk it. Ghouls uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting ghou use, since ghou lost ghouls. Ghou's going to buy toys and train the puppy

ghoulself."

050 A Wasted Chance

“What do you mean you don't want it?”

Ghouls mother's voice had risen far above what was socially acceptable, and ghoul cringed away from the sound, feeling it pierce ghouls ears like a siren. On ghouls shoulder, Ghast flared rots jewel-glass wings and hissed past rots fangs, but to no avail. Their amri simply turned his nose up at them from the floor and snorted smoke rings, ignoring rots protest entirely. Their mother was staring at them like they'd grown a third head.

“I mean,” Ghoul said, refusing to meet her eyes and feeling the anger creep into ghouls voice despite ghouls best attempts to keep it even and level, “I don't want it.”

Why did ghoul have to repeat ghoulself?

Because this was not the answer ghouls mother wanted to hear.

Because she just repeated, even louder than before, but this time grabbing ghouls arm as though ghoul'd been about to move away, which ghoul hadn't been, “What do you mean you don't want it!?”

Ghast squawked loudly in affront, and their amri just continued to glare silently. Out of the corner of ghouls eye, ghoul could see the nurse and their sphinx daemon were standing in the back of the room, looking awkwardly anywhere but at the four of them. Ghast squawked again, rots voice harsh and high pitched, more like a seagull than the deep 'majestic' thunder dragons were supposed to have, and the nurse's daemon turned their head away in clear embarrassment from the situation.

Another unabashedly loud squawk of protest from Ghast, and their mother finally let go of ghouls arm, her cheeks turning visibly redder, because she, too, was embarrassed by Ghast's voice not being what it was 'supposed to be'.

Now freed, ghoul took the opportunity to walk away from her, back over to the examination chair or whatever you called it, hopped up, sat down, and crossed ghouls arms and legs.

“No.” Ghoul then said, flatly. “I'm not getting it. I'm going to consent to dying.”

In the corner, the nurse spluttered, like they'd choked on their own spit.

Their mother gaped aloud and clutched at her chest like she'd been struck. Their amri sat down abruptly, and gaped his mouth open in clear shock. “Oh, honey,” He started to say, in his most patronizingly concerned voice, “It's not going to kill--”

“You want to replace my entire brain to get rid of my autism!”

“To cure your autism,” their mother stressed, “You want to be cured, don't you? Then you'll be able to go to the normal classes with your friends, and you'll finally stop thinking these horrible things about-- ”

Ghast started shrieking in earnest then, drowning out the rest of her sentence as ghoul bared ghouls teeth in a snarl of equal anger. They both knew she was talking about them being trans. She thought they were being “tricked into it” by the “trans cult”. She refused to listen to anything they had to say, or read any of the articles they showed her about how trans people had always existed. Not even ama or ava could get her or amri to change their minds.

That was why they'd gotten a divorce, and ghoul and Ghast had gone with their ama and ava.

Today was the last day that their mother would still have joint custody of them. She'd said she'd be bringing them to a waterpark.

She'd instead brought them to this clinic to try and convince them to...die.

She literally wanted them to get their entire brains taken out, rewired, and then put back. She thought it would “cure” their autism and transness at the same time.

Usually, the clinic specialized in transplanting people's brains into cybernetic or synthetic bodies, but they had recently started transplanting brains back into fully organic bodies.

Their mother sighed, and shook her head like she was sad. “This is exactly what I mean!” She had to shout to be heard over Ghast's insistent screeching. “I'm sorry – ” And she used ghoul's deadname to show how unsorry she really was, “ —but you really don't get a say in this. You're clearly incompetent and don't know what's best for-- ”

This time, it was the nurse who interrupted her, raising their voice to be heard over Ghast. “Well, actually, ma'am--” Ghast clamped their mouth shut suddenly to listen, so that the nurse's next words came out as a too-loud shout: “We can't operate without consent from the patient.”

For a few moments, the room was completely silent. Ghoul and Ghast were still processing what that meant, and their mother and amri were simply shocked into outraged silence.

Then the nurse's daemon chose to speak up, flicking their tail against the floor in front of their feet: "It's the law, there's nothing we can do about it."

It was then that the door to the room burst open, and their ama strode in, avi's wings flared behind her so that for a few delightful seconds, she appeared as though she had the wings of a demon to match the furious expression on her face.

Her eyes sought ghouls immediately, and, finding them, she jerked a thumb over her shoulder to indicate the hallway behind her where their vari was still waiting, the tips of his wings touching the walls on either side. Ignoring their mother completely, she said, firmly, "Lets go, kiddo."

Grinning in delight, ghoul leapt to obey, Ghast, still perched on ghouls shoulder, clacking rots claws in happiness.

Their mother tried to protest as ghoul slipped past her out into the hallway, but though their amri was bigger than their vari, their vari

had righteous anger on his side, and refused to budge an inch to let either of them get past him to where ghou, Ghast, and their ama were making towards the exit.

Only once they'd gotten out to the lobby of the clinic did he follow, continuing the block the way for their mother and amri. Thankfully the purple-carpeted lobby was empty, so there was no one to slow their progress down.

Their ama held the door open, and ghoul grinned at the sight of her car parked right above the sidewalk. It was high enough, and far enough to the side not to get in the way, but the engine still running, and was Gyro visible, peering down at ghoul over the side of the door. It was clear their ama and vari had all but jumped out and went charging into the clinic.

Gryo brought the car down to ground level as ghoul turned to smile up at ghouls ama, lifting ghouls phone out of ghouls pocket to show her. "It worked!"

Ghoul waited until she was looking, then pressed the button to activate the holodisplay.

Immediately, the black and red set up for the Seeker program popped

up, with, “Amavari are on the way!” still highlighted in pulsing red, and the distance meter now at 0. A smaller white box asked, “Are you safe? Click here.”

Realize ghoul hadn't discontinued the alert yet, ghoul said, “Oops,” and poked the white icon just as the car's wheels touched down behind ghoul. Ghoul had to enter ghouls pin to confirm that ghoul was really safe, then ghouls ama's phone pinged from her pocket, giving her the notification that the emergency was over.

“Well,” she said, eyeing the door to the clinic, which her daemon was still guarding, with ghouls mother and amri visible angrily behind the glass doors, “At least we know that works.” She held the car door open for ghoul, and ghoul happily climbed inside, Gyro grabbing ghouls hands for reassurance with two hands and patting Ghast with the other pair as soon as they were properly seated with the door shut behind them.

“Are you okay?” Ši asked in šia normal flat voice. On šia screen, a blue and yellow concerned emoticon appeared, animated so it was crying.

Ghouls ama ahad gotten into the car and turned on the engine at that point, and the car was rising up into the air. Ghoul turned to look

down as ghouls vari – with one scathing backward look – lifted his wings and lifted off, finally unblocking the door to the clinic so ghouls mother could run out and shake her fist after them as they rose beyond her reach, even if ghouls amri took to the air to follow them.

Ghoul knew without having to ask that this would be the last time ghoul ever saw ghouls mother, or ghouls amri.

"Yes," ghoul said, turning ghouls back on her to smile at Gyro, Ghast on ghouls shoulder humming the opening theme for The Ascender's Fall, "Yes, I've never been better!"

051: Neither Nor

Neopronouns: de/ad/ath/adself, used the same way as he/him/his/himself for this story.

Replace he with de

Replace him with ad

Replace his with ath

Replace himself with adself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"De is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as de gets a fence

set up around ath yard so the puppy can go outside without ad having to walk it. Ath uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting ad use, since de lost ath. De's going to buy toys and train the puppy adself"

051: Neither Nor

Patricia climbed the basements stairs one tired step at a time, juggling more than an armload's worth of mugs, and trying to make sure she didn't drop any. She'd finally used up all the mugs in the house for her coffee, and now she had to get the kids to wash them so the cycle could start all over again.

She always made herself coffee as soon as she got up in the morning, brought it down with her into the lab, drank it, and then left the mug to sit somewhere out of the way, forgetting to bring it back upstairs with her to be washed. And then the same thing happened the next day, and the next day, and the next day, until she'd used up all the mugs and they were all down in the lab in some forgotten corner.

The good news was that there was so much ambient ectoplasm in the lab after all the years of experiments and explosions that protoghosts spawned at a fairly regular rate, and, created in the real world as opposed to the Otherworld, they seemed to be attracted to food rather than ectoplasm. Every time it was time to bring the mugs back upstairs, she was sure to find at least a dozen different forms of postconsciousness inhabiting the mugs, slowly consuming the dregs of coffee that had been left behind, and replacing it with the ghostly equivalent of guano.

The protohosts themselves were mostly useless, but their guano was valuable- -it could be converted into extremely efficient ectopowered batteries that were then used to power their weapons, shields, nets, and other prototypes.

Granted, allowing the protohosts to colonize her used coffee mugs wasn't the most efficient way to collect their waste, but setting up a proper containment area and making sure safety procedures were actually in place would be expensive, and time consuming. It was far easier to just put the kids in charge of it. They kept ectoplasm containment units in the pantry with the rest of the tupperware, and this had been one of Barb, Leonard, Paul, and Tanner's chores since they were old enough to lift a spoon. Since Barb was with her friends at their book club, and Paul and Leonard were at their mini science camp for the week, that left only one option left for the job.

But that was okay with her, because having a high ESP rating seemed to help retain power in the guano in some way she hadn't figured out yet, and out of everyone in the family, Tanner had the highest ESP rating, even higher than Tracy's. Even higher than hers.

She pushed the basement door open with her hip, calling out, "Tanner- -!" Only to stop in surprise when she saw he was already in the kitchen, sitting at the island with a red notebook. She smiled

widely. Now she wouldn't have to go through the effort of dragging him out of his room. He was always locking himself in there these days. "Oh, there you are, sweetie! Perfect!" She lifted the mugs, then went over to dump them into the sink, saying cheerfully, "You know what time it is! I want these mugs squeaky clean by lunch time, and I want all the guano sorted by ectotype and recorded on the computer, and when you're done that, you can help- -"

Tanner tried to interrupt her. "Mom- -"

She resolutely carried on like she hadn't heard him. He couldn't weasel his way out of his chores, not if he wanted to get paid for them. She sorted the mugs in the sink from most ectoplasmically contaminated to least while she continued, "Clean out the garage, since your father's already collected more junk, so I need you to sort through it and make a list of what's there so I know what's salvageable and useful, what's actual trash, and what we can cannibalize. We need some more space to store the new cores I collected, and we're running out of room in the fridge, so we can use the old chest freezer out there. And when you're done that, we can --"

"Mom, can you just pause for a minute?" Tanner's voice was louder this time, more insistent, and she huffed in exasperation while she

turned around from the sink, prepared to scold him for being rude, only to stop when she saw his expression. There was a seriousness there she wasn't used to seeing on her youngest son's face. She felt her heart skip a beat in alarm.

"I'm not trying to argue about my chores," He said, hunching his shoulders defensively in his too-big, black shirt, his dyed-purple hair hanging down over his eyes, "I just need to talk to you. Can you -- can you sit down?" He gestured at the island in the middle of the kitchen, surrounded on all sides by the family's mis-matched stools.

Her mind immediately ran through all the possibilities of what he could be about to confess -- failing grades, being suspended from school again, being in trouble with the police, or worse, the psi-police...The possibilities were both endless and terrible. Tanner had been acting strange for the past year, and she thought was prepared for all but the absolute worst possibilities.

Tanner had once been such a good, quiet boy, but ever since their last annual camping trip, he'd been acting out, misbehaving at school, skipping classes, having a temper at home, not turning in his homework, not completing his chores, hanging out with that strange new girl with the bad reputation, running around at all hours of the night and refusing to say where he'd been...and his aura...

She had always had trouble seeing his, or anyone else's auras, but the few times she'd glimpsed it before the problems began, it had always been a bright, sunny yellow.

Now, though it gave her a splitting headache to try and look sideways enough to see it, it...it was different. But not in any way she could described. It was still yellow, but there was another color there too, somehow, one that defied her grasp of language to describe.

She'd been hoping it would change back on its own. And lately she hadn't been able to see it at all to check on it, and she'd been so busy lately with work and her experiments...

And Tanner hadn't said a thing to her, or to Tracy. A change in your aura was not something to be taken lightly, and there was no way Tanner wouldn't be aware of it. But he'd never come to her or his father for help, so she'd let the problem lie, waiting for him to trust her.

Auras were very personal things, and you didn't just go around interrogating people about theirs, even if they were your own flesh and blood child.

...And now she wasn't sure she even wanted to know what Tanner had done, now, that was so serious he finally felt the need to come to her about it, after all the months she and Tracy had spent trying to convince him that he could come to them with any problems he had.

But she didn't say any of that out loud, she just regarded him suspiciously while she took the proffered seat. She really wasn't sure she actually wanted to know. "Alright, Tanner," She said, trying to get her mind to stop imagining horrible scenarios. Even if it would lead to her being pleasantly surprised when it wasn't that bad, she still didn't like thinking about all the horrible things her son could have gotten into to put this expression on his face. "I'm listening."

For a moment, there was silence in the room, except for the soft humming of one of the protohosts over in the mugs, the sound reverberating off the stainless steel of the sink.

Tanner shifted in his seat, then grabbed the red notebook that was on the countertop in front of him, lifting it so the back was facing her while he ran his fingers along the spine and creating a soft ziiping sound from his fingernail hitting the metal.

She looked at the cardboard backing, raising an eyebrow at the many black and blue scratch marks in pen where things had been written

or drawn, with some of them crossed out in thick black marker, leaving only some shiny outlines still visible in the black ink. There were many drawings of eyes, some simple, some more detailed, in blue and black ink, and a few in purple or blue glitter gel. Some of them were colored in with marker or red pen, all different. There was no space on the back that didn't have some sort of drawing on it, in some shape or form.

It didn't give her any hint about what this conversation was going to be about, besides that Tanner really shouldn't be covering his notebooks in drawings. That was another thing his teachers had been complaining to her about lately, more than usual, and now she could see why.

More silence.

She was beginning to wonder how long they would have to sit here before Tanner got the courage to say whatever it was he needed to tell her, when he finally opened the notebook and flipped the front over the back, and, stared down at a page inside, his eyes distinctly scanning rapidly back and forth over whatever he'd written while she watched him.

Then he glanced up at her again, biting his lip.

"I, I- -uh, this is going to sound like a weird question," He said, his face flushing bright red, "But do you know what pronouns are?"

It took her mind a few seconds to catch up to what he'd actually said. The way he'd started blushing, she'd feared for a few terrible seconds that they were about to have The Talk whether she was prepared for it or not.

"What?" She said, trying to figure out what he was asking. Was this some sort of new slang? He was still blushing furiously. That was not a good sign. "Pronouns, you mean like in grammar?" Dear gods of the Otherworld, she hoped this wasn't some sort of slang for sex. She was not prepared to have that conversation on a Saturday morning when she hadn't even had any coffee yet.

He nodded, still blushing, and now unable to meet her eyes, which only increased her confusion.

But she began to relax though the confusion, some of her worry slipping away. Maybe he wasn't in trouble, maybe he just needed help with his homework and was embarrassed to ask. Had she really made it seem like he couldn't come to her with questions about his homework?

She said, trying to keep herself from laughing with relief so he wouldn't think she was making fun of him, "Do you need help with your English homework...?"

Tanner looked up, and stared at her like she'd grown a second head, the blush slowly fading from his still-red skin.

"What?" Then he stammered, laughing a little as his eyes widened, "Oh, no, no, oh my gods, no. I don't need help with my homework. We aren't even learning about grammar, we're reading a book." He shook the notebook at little, for some sort of emphasis.

"Oh." Now she was confused again. "Okay...? Then why are you asking me about pronouns? Help me out here, kid, you're confusing me."

Tanner didn't say anything right away, but his shoulders tensed as he stared down at the notebook, fiddling with a corner of one of the pages.

Then he said, his voice tense and stilted, "Because I want to change mine."

Patricia felt her eyebrows raise themselves up to her hairline. "Huh?"

What did that even mean?

"What are you --" she started to ask.

He interrupted again, his voice determined. "I'm nonbinary."

She took a moment to process that, but came up with nothing but confusion. She stared.

"What does that mean?" She asked, shaking her head, trying to fit the pieces of this conversation into something coherent.

First she thought he was going to tell her he was on the run from the police or something, then she thought he needed help with homework, and now she just had no idea what was going on. "I don't understand."

Tanner set the notebook back down on the table, flipping the cover back over so it was shut again. She noticed that the front was just as covered in drawings, some of them scratched out or painted over, as the back.

He tapped his fingers on the cover, as though reminding himself it was there, before he said, his voice hesitant, "Do you know what the word transgender means?"

Her eyebrows raised even further, even as a slowly dawning realization and memory began to take root. "Yes..." She said slowly, trying to keep her tone of voice normal and calm despite the way it suddenly felt like her heart wanted to leap out of her chest.

Now she knew how Tanner must be feeling, from the look on his face. "I knew a couple people back in college who were like that. Actually, one of my roommate's friends was trans. She asked us to call her Riene instead of her birth name, and asked us to use female...oh."

Oh. Oh. That was why he'd asked if she knew what pronouns were. He wanted to change his pronouns. Her son -- no, wait, daughter -- no, wait --

Tanner looked at her, his expression hopeful. "So you'd be okay if I changed my pronouns?"

The words "Of course, sweetie." were out of her mouth before she even processed them. Now her mind was racing for a whole different reason. She would have to start practicing calling Tanner by female pronouns right away, she would have to tell Tracy, and Barb if she didn't already know, and Leon and Paul, she would have to - -

"Okay, well, that- -that's good. I want to change them to de, ad, ath, and adself."

Her thought came up short like a record scratch, or a train crash.

She blinked. "What? I thought you meant you wanted- -"

She stopped.

Now she was really confused.

"I thought you would want to use female pronouns? Don't you want me to call you 'she' and 'her' from now on?"

Tanner grimaced, shaking his head. "No. I mean, they aren't really female pronouns, but that's- -" he shook his head again, and waved a hand dismissively. "No. I don't want to use she/her pronouns. I'm trans, but I'm not a girl. I'm nonbinary -- I'm not a boy or a girl. I'm..."

He shrugged. "Not binary. I'm neither. I'm something else. That's why I want to change my pronouns."

Patricia wracked her brain, trying to remember what he'd said he wanted to change them to. Something with a D...? She'd never heard

of them before.

"What did you say you wanted to change them to?" She asked, mentally shoving all other thoughts away so she would remember them this time. She was determined not to mess this up, even if she was extremely confused.

This was what she got for not drinking her morning coffee.

"De, ad, ath, and adself." Tanner said, flipping open the notebook so he could rip out a page and push it across to her, trailing little bits of paper on the table from where the edges had gotten caught in the spiral.

Written on the page in black marker, the hand writing so careful and perfect she could almost feel the nervousness in it, the paper read:

De/ad/ath/adself:

he = de

him = ad

his = ath

himself = adself

Example:

Tanner is my child, and de is nonbinary. This means de isn't a- -

The sentence continued further, but Tanner spoke again before she could read more, drawing her eyes back to his and away from the paper.

"I know it might seem complicated," He- -de!, she reminded herself at the speed of light -- started to say, lifting a hand to the back of -- she glanced down at the paper -- ad? Ath? yes! -- head in embarrassment, "But you just replace what you used to call me with the new ones. If you would have said he, you say de. If you would have said him, you say ad. If you would have said his, you say ath, and if you would have said himself, you say adself."

She was doing her best to memorize this, burning the pattern into her mind as quickly as she could, and she nodded seriously to show she understood. 'De, ad, ath.' she thought to herself, 'de, ad, ath.' Easy enough. 'De, ad, ath.'

But h -- de must have seen something in her expression to sow

doubt, because de crossed ath arms defensively over ath chest, and said, as though to counter an argument de assumed she was going to make, "Matt and Alice have been using my pronouns for two whole months now."

With the unspoken insinuation that if she tried to protest that it was 'too difficult' or 'too complicated', then she was admitting that a pair of highschoolers were smarter than her.

She didn't know what it said about her as a parent that her child's first assumption was that she would hate ad for being transgender, but she needed to do something to fix that ASAP.

"Okay," She said, hoping her tone came across the way she wanted it to-- calm and accepting and not angry at all, "So I just want to make sure I'm saying this right. Um, okay --"

She closed her eyes to concentrate, and said making up the sentences as she went along, "Tanner and I are going shopping today, since de needs some new clothes and school supplies, and afterward, I want to bring ad to Nicko's, since I know its ath favorite restaurant, and it's just the two of us while everyone else is out having fun, and they shouldn't be allowed to have all the fun." She opened her eyes again. "Did I get that right?"

Tanner was staring at her, ath face slightly blank. Then a smile quickly began to spread across ath face, until de was grinning widely. "That was perfect! How did- -wha- -" De looked shocked, and more than a little confused. "I thought you'd be..."

De trailed off, obviously not wanting to say the words 'screaming at me' out loud.

Patricia felt the disquiet in the pit of her stomach sink deeper.

Her child thought she would hate ad for being transgender. Her child thought her reaction would be to scream and yell and punish ad.

As though de could sense what she was thinking, Tanner said softly, looking away, "We thought, well, I mean, I thought you'd be mad." De laughed nervously, still not looking at her. "I actually wondered if I should pack a bag before I came down to talk to you."

And it suddenly occurred to her why de'd waited until now, specifically, to tell her this. It was just the two of them in the house, and it would be for the next three days. Tracy would be picking Barb up from the school, and they'd be going out on their father-daughter-bonding camping trip.

If she'd reacted badly to Tanner's revelation, de only had one person de needed to run away from, and three days to figure out how de was going to deal with the reactions of the rest of ath family.

The urge to ask ad where de would have run to was strong, but she kept her mouth shut. There was no point in asking, because de probably wouldn't tell her, and she could already guess.

De would have gone to Matt or Alice's. Probably Alice's, since the Shearmans were rich enough that if she or Tracy tried to press the issue, the Shearmans could probably just sue them for child abuse and have all of their kids taken out of their custody faster than she could cry 'kidnapping'.

So instead of asking questions neither of them wanted to answer, she leaned over the table, reaching a hand out, and said, "This is your home, Tanner, and you will never be forced to leave just for being yourself."

But Tanner was still looking towards the living room, and either didn't notice, or was pretending not to notice her offered hand.

"How do you think dad will react?" Ath voice was quiet, ath voice rough like de was trying to control ath emotions.

Ath eyes were closed, she suddenly realized. Tanner had ath eyes tightly closed, and ath fists clenched on ath knees. De was breathing slowly and deeply, and she suddenly realized that as anxious as she felt, it couldn't begin to compare to how Tanner had to be feeling. She bet if she could see ath aura right now, it would be roiling.

De was just a kid, coming out to a parent, with no way to know how she would react. She couldn't imagine how terrifying it had to be to not know whether your parents would still love you, or whether or not you would still have a home to belong to when the conversation was over.

Her parents hadn't approved of her choice to study ghosts, even with her confirmed status as an esper, something they were supposed to be proud of, but that was her choice. She could have chosen any other field of study, and while her parents were dismissive and disappointed, she'd never feared for her safety, never feared for even a second that they would disown her.

Were Tanner's eyes closed because de was fighting back tears?

How could she have raised her children to fear her?

"Tanner..." Her voice struggled not to break. She couldn't cry right

now. This was about her child, not herself."Your father loves you just as much as I do. He's still going to love you no matter what. You don't even have to worry- -he's the one who taught me how to use our friend's pronouns back in college--

"You see, I kept messing up because I never thought about it until I was right there talking to her, and it was so embarrassing and frustrating for both of us, especially because I always made such a big deal out of messing up, but he pulled me aside to explain that I needed to practice with her pronouns if I wanted to get them right.

"He'd been friends with her longer than I had, he knew her back before she asked people to change what they called her, and he gave me sentences to practice in my head so I wouldn't keep messing up, and it helped so much.

"I stopped embarrassing myself and Riene, and..." She trailed off, unsure where she was going with this, besides: "Your father and I love you. We aren't going to kick you out, or disown you, or anything like that. Your father will be happy to use your new pronouns, and I guarantee you that he- -and I - -will destroy anyone who tries to cause you problems."

Something in Tanner's face twitched, and she took it as a sign that

she was on the right track.

"We're going to support you, Tanner, no matter what pronouns you use, no matter that you're...what did you say it was called? Nonbinary? I'm not judging, I just never heard of it before now."

De nodded, still keeping ath eyes closed, though ath breathing had calmed down a little. "Yeah, I'm nonbinary. Non-binary, as in not binary. Which in my case means neither girl nor boy, neither male nor female, neither..." De trailed off, then shook ath head.

"It just means I'm your kid instead of your son." De said, "Or, well, Alice suggested you could call me your sprout, because vamp likes plants so much, but I'm not very good with plants so...yeah, you can just stick with kid for now, if anyone asks." And still, ath eyes were closed.

Patricia pulled her hand back, since de still hadn't taken it or noticed. The fact that he had referred to Alice as 'vamp' didn't escape her notice. "Okay, nonbinary. That makes sense." She said, mentally face palming at how obvious it was once she thought about the word. Nonbinary, non-binary, not-binary. Neither male nor female, girl nor boy, son nor daughter. "Your father will understand, probably even better than I do, since he knew a lot more trans people back in

college than I did."

And knew them better, too.

...Should she ask about Alice? The fact that de'd said anything at all meant de would probably want to share more, and she felt like it would be better to just get all of it out in the open at once.

"So, has Alice changed- -" She hesitated for a moment, then forged on, "Pronouns too? It sounded like you said 'vamp'."

Which definitely sounded short for vampire, and from what she knew of Alice, that fit the bill perfectly, though she wasn't aware of any pronouns in any language that sounded like vampire. But then, she'd never heard of de, ad, or ath, either.

Tanner had finally opened ath eyes again, and this time de was looking at her, looking much more relaxed and normal. "Yeah," De said, "Alice has a few different sets, and Matt and I cycle through them." Ath eyes narrowed a little. "Do you want to know Alice's pronouns?"

There was definitely a challenge in ath tone, and were it not for the situation, it would have annoyed her. But she knew de was only

sticking up for ath friend, making sure her support wasn't conditional on the person in question being a member of the family.

So she smiled, glad she was going to pass the test. After the reaction Tanner'd thought she'd have, she needed to restore ath faith in her. She couldn't believe she'd ever let it slip so far, couldn't believe she'd allowed her kid to believe she could ever hate ad. "I would love to learn Alice's pronouns." She said.

Tanner's expression stayed suspicious. "Alice uses vamp/pyr/pyrs/vampself, ghost/ghosts/ghostself, bat/bats/batself, and thorn,thorns,thornself. And before you complain, bat started using ghost/ghostself specifically to annoy thorns parents, so if you start complaining, it'll just make ghost even more spiteful."

That was a lot to take in, but Patricia nodded, having guessed that much for herself. She didn't know any of Tanner's friends very well, what with the fact that when they were over, they were always in Tanner's room playing on the Vasdeck, but she'd picked up enough about Alice to know that...vamp did not take kindly to authority figures.

Since Tanner had been kind enough to write down ath pronouns, she could guess how the others were meant to be used. Just replacing

she, her, hers, and herself with the words Tanner had listed. Though she was going to have trouble remembering which ones Alice used. She tried to remember...definitely the vampire ones, and the ghost ones...but the others, she was drawing a blank.

"It might get a little confusing if there's a ghost," She said, wanting to not let on just how confused she was, "but I don't think it should be that hard to get used to." She hesitated, wondering if this next question was going to make her lose those precious parenting points she'd been earning throughout this conversation. "Could you write these down for me so I don't forget?"

To her surprise, Tanner smiled widely, at her eyes finally opening to positively sparkle up at her with clear happiness. Apparently, that had been the right question to ask.

De opened the notebook again, and pulled out another piece of paper, and slid it across the table to her.

She looked down at it, and saw all of the pronouns de'd listed out for Alice. De'd already had all of them written down.

Then de pulled out another piece, and passed that over as well.

"Matt uses tech/techno/techs/techself. Both their parents know about their pronouns, and Matt's are fine with it, Alice's..." De shrugged, but smiled. "Not so much. But that's the way ghost likes it."

Patricia took both pages and studied them, seeing that they were in the same format as the first, showing the old pronouns and the new ones, with an example sentence to show how to use them, with each letter written out so neatly it must have taken ten minutes just to write out a few simple words.

She wondered why de hadn't just used the printer. But then, that would have required asking to use the printer, and of course she would have wanted to know what de was printing...so, no, it made sense for why de'd hand written them.

But there were other questions she should be asking. She remembered dealing with these questions way back when in college. "So, is there anyone I shouldn't use your pronouns around?"

She really didn't want to phrase it as "am I one of the last people to find out", but she was having a hard time figuring out a better way to phrase it... "Like if we're out at Nicko's, or if I need to talk to one of your teachers. Do you want me to use your pronouns, or...?" And she hadn't even asked if de wanted to change ath name yet...

Tanner nodded. "I want you to use my pronouns. Now that I've told you, and I'll tell dad and the others once they get back, I want to use them all the time. I want everyone to use them. It just- -" Ad smiled widened. "It just really makes me happy, I don't know how to explain why. It just feels right."

She nodded, trying and failing to understand, but accepting it anyways, knowing it was more important that she supported ad rather than that she understood perfectly.

She didn't need to understand it to respect it- -that was one of the things she'd had to learn quickly in college if she didn't want to lose all her friends and husband-to-be.

Realizing what sort of people she would have had to make friends with if she chose the wrong path had set her straight almost immediately. She'd always thought of herself as open-minded, and her days in college had been the first time that conceptualization had actually been stress-tested in the real world.

She was just glad she'd been willing to listen and learn instead of cementing herself into the mindset of a bigot- -she'd seen the sort of people who mocked Riene for being trans, and they were the exact sort of people who would mock any woman for not conforming to

their perfect ideal of womanhood, whether they were trans or not. They were the conservatives and republicans, hateful bigots to their core. They hated the poor, they hated the disabled, they hated women, they hated people who weren't straight white Christians, and they hated queer people.

She hated that she could have so easily become one of them if she'd only made a few different choices. If she'd believed the lies that had told her that people like Riene were trying to infiltrate and destroy feminist spaces, trying to lull her into a false sense of security. Riene wasn't dangerous, wasn't trying to infiltrate anything, and neither were any of the other trans women and men that she'd met thanks to Tracy.

And it was only now, decades later as she looked back, that she realized that people like her kid had been back there too. There had been Skit, who'd always rejected being called a man or a woman, and Jesse, who'd gone back and forth and in between and was always changing pronouns...

Every now and then, she talked on the phone or shared emails with her old classmates, the ones who were still the kind of people to stay in touch, but between studying the natural ghost manifestations that Port Free Haven was a hotspot for, building prototypes for their own

new-age shrine in their basement, preparing for and then raising five kids, and now hunting ghosts as a full-time job, there wasn't much time left in the day to chat with old friends, let alone make new ones.

She knew Port Free Haven had its own thriving Queer community, but she'd never had time to join in on any of the events, though she knew Tracy had been making the time.

But maybe she should make some time, too.

But there was one more question she should be asking, just to be sure. "So do you want to change your name?"

De sat back a little, brow furrowed. "Um..." De shrugged again. "I'll have to get back to you on that, since I haven't decided what I'd change it to if I did. You can still call me Tanner for now."

Well, that was one thing she didn't have to worry about. Setting up appointments with Port Free Havens' legal courts was like pulling teeth since the ghost incursion began, since they were so backed up with insurance claims and all manner of ghost-related problems.

It would take months, if not a year to get an appointment to legally change Tanner's name if de chose to change it, though that wouldn't

have stopped her from calling in to the school to make them change it on their files, or from telling people to use ath new name.

Tanner was tapping ath fingers on the notebook again. De was smiling again too, she was glad to see. And it seemed like the redness was fading from ath eyes even as she watched.

"I really didn't expect this conversation to go so well." De said, shaking ath head a little to get ath hair out of ath eyes, "Thank you, mom."

She shook her own head. "You don't need to thank me," she said firmly, "I am your mother, it is my job to love you. I'm sorry I ever made you think I wouldn't love you just for being yourself. That is my fault, and I take responsibility for it. I've known about trans people since I was in college, and I made the mistake of assuming that you, and your brothers and sister, wouldn't be, couldn't be. I should have known better, and I'm sorry for never talking about these things with you when you were younger, so you knew what they were and that I knew what they were."

She wanted to say, 'I guess your father and I have been too busy with work to talk to you about our friends', but she didn't want to make excuses.

“But I want to support you, and I want to try to fix my mistakes. I still have Riene's phone number and email, and, I mean, if you want, I can call her and see if she'd want to come over. I know you said you're not trans in the way she is, but she's really nice, and she might be able to answer any questions you have, and it'd be nice for me to catch up with her, it's been a long time since we spoke, and she lives over in the next city, so it's not too far of a drive. We could even go to visit her if she doesn't want to deal with the ghosts.”

Tanner had frozen like a deer in the headlights, and she wasn't sure why. "Your friend...from college? Was this the same college where you met, uh, uncle Kurt?"

She winced at the reminder. "Ah, yes, but I promise she's nothing like Kurt." She reassured.

Kurt had always been Tracy's friend, not hers, and he was the one exception in her husband's impeccable taste in people. He had wanted to date her since he first met her, and no matter how many times she turned him down, he just kept trying to convince her in small, subtle ways, and Tracy was completely oblivious. She loved her husband, but he had a blindspot the size of Texas when it came to Kurt and his behavior.

She'd tried talking to him about it a few times, but he always brushed her off, insisting that she was reading things wrong, or it wasn't a big deal, ect ect ect. It was the strangest thing, too. He always listened to her with any other topic, always took her concerns seriously. But not when it came to Kurt. If she didn't know any better, she'd think he was being psychically influenced, but she'd checked, and Kurt's aura was so dim he probably wouldn't feel a psychic wave if it slapped him in the face.

She'd stopped bothering to bring the problem up with Tracy, and now just tried to stay as far away from Kurt when he visited as she could.

Fortunately, he lived several states away, so avoiding him was easy for the most part these days.

"Are you sure?" Tanner pressed, still on the question and looking nervous. "Kurt's... really creepy."

"No, Tanner, I promise it's not another Kurt situation. I know your father is...very attached to Kurt, but he'd always been...well, he's always been a bit of a creep." There was really no nice way of putting it. Kurt didn't care who saw him flirt with her. He even did it in front of her own kids, and they were old enough to recognize it for

what it was, and tell it wasn't just a joke. "Your father just doesn't want to acknowledge it. But Riene, I promise, is nice, and completely normal, and not in any way a creep, I promise. In fact, she disliked Kurt as much as I did, and it was lucky he never really hung out with the rest of us, or he would have been kicked out. I promise not all of our friends from college are creepy. Kurt is the outlier."

Tanner still looked extremely skeptical, but after a few moments he said, begrudgingly, "Well, if you're sure, then yeah, I guess it'd be cool to meet her. Could I invite Alice and Matt over too?"

"Of course," She said quickly, "I'm sure she'd love to meet them! The last time we spoke, she told me she was running a sort of summer camp for young queer people, and I'm not sure if she's still doing it, but would that be something you'd be interested in? Not this year, obviously, but maybe next year?" She was thinking of the for-parents groups Riene had also said she ran, to help queer parents, and parents of queer kids, learn more so they could better support their children.

Tanner laughed nervously. "Um, how about I let you know after I meet her?"

"That's fair." She conceded easily. Kurt really had set a bad precedent for introducing their old friends to their kids. She would have to make sure to look up some better friends, see what they were up to. Maybe she could find out what Skit was up to these days.

They sat in silence for a few moments, then Tanner asked, "So, uh, I was going to invite Alice and Matt over after I talked to you if it went well, to tell them the good news. Can I, or do I still have to wash the dishes?" De was warily side-eying the pile of mugs she'd put in the sink, and the faint sounds the protoghosts were making.

She'd almost forgotten about them entirely.

She shook her head, willing to let it slide just this once. For now. The longer the protoghosts were inhabiting the mugs, the more samples that could be collected, and she could go without coffee for a day. The lack of it hadn't failed her too disastrously, it turns out. "You can do those tomorrow, go ahead and invite Alice and Matt over. If you still want to go to Nicko's --"

"Yes!"

"— we'll go for dinner instead of lunch, and Alice and Matt can come with us if they want, my treat, then you can clean out the garage and

wash the mugs tomorrow, and we can go shopping then too. You get the rest of the day off. Does that sound fair?"

"Yes!" De was practically vibrating in ath chair, and beaming so widely it had to be hurting ath face.

Suddenly, de bolted out of ath chair, and flung ath arms around her in a hug, almost causing her to fall backwards off her stool. She caught herself on the edge of the table with a laugh, then hugged ad back tightly.

"Thank you." De said softly, ath voice slightly muffled in her shoulder so that it came out sounding a bit strange.

"You don't need to thank me." She whispered back, hugging ad tightly, "I'm your mother. It's my job."

De let go, she released ad, and de stepped back, still grinning from ear to ear. "I'm gonna go call Alice and Matt!" De exclaimed. Then de spun around, bolted out of the room, and sprinted up the stairs.

She heard ath door slam shut, and thought to herself, 'at least this time it's from excitement instead of anger.'

She looked around the kitchen, then, trying to figure out what she

should be doing now that she wasn't going to be getting those guano samples until tomorrow. Or coffee.

She'd been planning on building the first in a series of new ectoweapons, which, if they worked the way she thought they should, should cancel out a ghost's ectosignature once it gained a sample from it, which would either destroy the ghost outright, or at least reduce it to such a weakened state that it wouldn't be able to take on any form except a puddle of inert ectoplasm. She would only find out the exact results after she tested it.

It was something to look forward to.

She smiled to herself as she pushed out of her chair and headed back down into the lab, taking the pieces of paper Tanner had given her with her, knowing that she had multiple sets of pronouns she needed to practice if she wanted her kid to continue trusting her with important information about adself.

She swung into her chair in front of the computer, and thought, 'de, ad, ath, adself' as she loaded up the program she used for laying out the microchips. 'Tanner is my child, and I love ad very much. I hope de knows de can trust me with anything, and that I will love ad no matter what.'

If she started now, and worked until it was time to bring Tanner and ath friends to the restaurant, then continued working on it when they got back, the new ectoweapon would be complete by the time Tracy and Barb got home from their trip, and Leon and Paul got back from camp, and she and Tracy could patrol together to test it after Tanner talked to everyone.

Maybe if they were lucky, they would even be able to hit some of the notorious Legion of Park Street.

She smiled to herself, and thought, 'de, ad, ath...'

052: The New Bridge

Neopronouns: ser/sera/raph/seraphim which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with ser

Replace him with sera

Replace his with raph

Replace himself with seraphim

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ser is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ser gets a fence

set up around raph yard so the puppy can go outside without sera having to walk it. Raph uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting sera use, since ser lost raph. Ser's going to buy toys and train the puppy seraphim.”

052: The New Bridge

Raph arm hooked through Dave's for subtle support that ser was exceedingly grateful for, they entered the door of the restauraunt together, with Dave opening the door with his free hand, and leading sera into the dimly-lit, "cozy" steakhouse.

The reception area was full, with a large group of people sitting on a cushioned bench off to the side with two small kids playing together on the floor. Ser expected to be held aside to wait, but to raph surprise, one of the employees, dressed in a black apron with purple trim, came forward to greet them and lead them to a table right away.

Ser shared a puzzled, silent glance with Dave at their good fortune, but they followed the server without question. Ser was assuming that the larger group was still waiting for the rest of their party to show up. Or maybe there weren't enough larger tables to accomodate them yet.

They were led further into the restaraunt past booths and tables of chatting patrons, the sizzle of steaks audible though the brightly lit doorway that clearly led to the kitchen as they walked past it, and the large bar area next to it. Country music played over the speakers.

They were given a booth along the far wall, below a colorful mural of a golden eagle sitting on top of a cactus eating a snake. The waiter

excused themselves, saying, "I'll be back to start your drinks in just a minute or two--" and gesturing a circle with their order pad before moving off at a fast-walk. Probably going to help with the large group at the door.

"Yes, that's fine..." Ser said, a bit too late for the waiter to hear sera.

Shaking his head, Dave released raph arm so ser could slide seraphim onto the bench, grateful for the weight it took off raph ankle, and the thick, soft cushion that was gentle against raph still-tender shoulder.

Ser couldn't help but breathe a quiet sigh of releaf now that ser was off raph feet. Dave, sliding onto the bench across from sera, furrowed his brown in concern. "That was really hurting you that much?" He asked, his voice pitched low for privacy depite the fact that most of the table around them were deserted. As far as ser could see, there was only one person sitting even remotely near them, at a table by themselves across the floor.

Did ser really want to admit how much raph ankle was really hurting sera? It felt like knives were twisting in the joint every time ser moved it.

It was with reluctance that ser admitted, "Yeah."

Ser knew it was ridiculous, but some part of sera was insistin that if ser didn't admit how much it hurt, that somehow it wouldn't hurt as much. And that didn't make any sense at all. Admitting how much pain ser was in wouldn't magically make it worse.

But there was another reason ser'd been trying to avoid talking about how much pain ser was in, and it was because discussing raph ankle inevitably led to...

"Lee, I really think you should press charges."

This was exactly what ser had been trying to avoid.

"That's too much effort." Ser said, already tired of the conversation.

Dave knew ser well enough by now to realized that "too much effort" didn't mean what it sounded like.

He folded his hands on the table, tapping his fingers together rhythmically. "Which part is too much effort?" He asked patiently.

Ser slumped back against the seat of the booth. "All of it."

Dave wasn't deterred. "Is it because you're scared Blair'll retaliate?"

Ser shook raph head, regretting the fact that ser was out of ibuprophen. The ache in raph shoulder was slowly becoming more and more part of raph awareness. "No, it's not that. It's – the whole thing. All the paperwork, having to go to court, having to deal with the cops, I just can't do all that."

Dave opened his mouth to respond, but the waiter hustled back at that moment, looking slightly flustered and hurriedly saying apologetically as they slid a small basket of rolls onto the table, "Sorry about that wait --but my name's Trish, my pronouns are she/her--"

And she gestured to a small black and yellow pin that ser hadn't noticed until now on her lapel-- "and I'll be serving you today. Just be careful with the rolls, they're fresh out of the oven, and I mean right out of the oven, so they'll be really hot."

Considering ser had been eying them since ser saw them, the warning was appreciated. Ser could see the steam rolling up away from them.

"Can I get you two started with some drinks?" Trish the waiter asked.

"I'll take a sweet tea with lemon." Dave said, at almost the same time that ser said, "I'll have a root beer."

Trish the waiter laughed a little, clearly nervous, but waved them off when they both opened their mouths again to apologize. "So one root beer and one sweet tea with lemon?"

After glancing at Dave to make sure he wasn't going to say the same thing, ser affirmed, "Yes, please."

"Alright. And would you like any appetizers today? Today we've got a special on the onion rings, and we also have mozzarella sticks, and fried okra."

Ser was splurging with raph tax return, so, as ser'd planned with Dave ahead of time on the drive over, ser got an order of the mozzarella sticks, an an order of onion rings for seraphim, (they were good cold), and then another order of onion rings for Dave, who'd never had them cold, but was curious enough to try, especially because ser was paying for it.

Dave ordered some kind of steak with a baked potato and fries, and ser got the fried catfish, with a baked sweet potato and mashed potatoes.

Trish the waiter raised her eyebrows when they were done, and said with a smile, "Wow, you guys must be hungry today!" Then read their order back to them to make sure it was right, and went off to get their drinks.

Ser reached out for the bread basket, and immediately had to snatch raph fingers back at the heat. She really hadn't been exaggerating.

Seeing Dave watch sera, ser made an exaggerated grimacing pout, and Dave shook his head in amusement. "Just don't burn yourself." He said, "And you can have them all, by the way, I never cared for them."

Ser pretended to gasp in horror, then turned it into an evil laugh – "Mwahaha, more for me then!" And ser gladly pulled the basket over to raph side of the table. Still too hot to eat, though.

"And, look." Ser said, sacrificing the tips of raph fingers to tear one of the rolls in half so it would cool down faster, "We can talk about...that...after we're done eating, alright? This is the first time

I've been in a restaraunt in five years. I just want to be able to enjoy good food I didn't have to make myself, deal?"

Propping his hands up under his chin as he watched sera rip more of the rolls in half, ser didn't miss the affectionate smile on his face.

"Deal." He said.

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good food I didn't have to make myself, deal?"

Propping his hands up under his chin as he watched sera rip more of the rolls in half, ser didn't miss the affectionate smile on his face.

"Deal." He said.

053: The Cycle of Lives

Neopronouns: pearl/pearls/pearlself which follow the same rules as it/its/itself

Replace it with pearl

Replace its with pearls

Replace itself with pearlself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Pearl is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as pearl gets a fence set up around pearls yard so the puppy can go outside without pearl having to walk it. Pearls uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting pearl use, since pearl lost pearls. Pearl's going to buy toys and train the puppy pearlself."

053: The Cycle of Lives

It never ceased to amaze pearl how tiny they were.

When they were born, they were no bigger than pearls smallest claw, and weighed so little, pearl could barely even feel them when their mother proudly strapped them into their first saddle on pearls back.

They grew up slower than the domestic animals, but so much faster than a dragon, so that by the time the hatchlings born on the same day gained to fly short distances on their own, the humans had already long since lost their baby teeth and were already halfway to maturity, going through puberty starting to take on the first characteristics that defined adults in their species.

But they always stayed small, even as fully grown elders, never getting bigger than a newborn hatchling.

Pearls human was sleeping in the saddle, now several times larger, and several decades older than the first time they had slept there. Their weight was now noticeable, but still so slight pearl thought pearl would never mind, no matter how big they got.

Humans stored fat on their bodies just like dragons did, and pearls human was very fat. Pearl preferred them this way, especially after they'd gotten sick for so long and lost so much of their weight, pearl

hadn't even been able to feel if they were in the saddle or not, and had had to constantly keep twisting pearls head around to make sure they hadn't fallen off, despite the constant, if weakened, humm of their telepathic bond.

The landscape below pearl was serene, dark grasslands and darker, tree-thickened hills cut through here and there with thin wisps of rivers and creeks that glowed yellow in the light of the full moons behind them.

The destination of both rivers and dragon and rider lay ahead of them near the horizon, growing closer with every lazy wingbeat.

Pearl had flown this journey so many times over pearls lifetime that pearl knew almost exactly how many more wingbeats it would take before pearl could land, if the wind kept up its pattern.

On pearls back, through their bond, pearl could see and feel pearls human was dreaming of flying alongside pearl, with midnight blue and red wings to match pearls black and white, dancing and twirling with pearl through the skies like a hatchling that had never known sorrow. Even in this dream, they were still so small, their wingspan only the size of one of pearl's wings. It was hard to remember what it was like to be big when your current body was so small.

In their next life, they would be the dragon they were in their dreams, and in a few hundred more years, if nothing else killed pearl before pearl could die of old age, pearl would be reborn as the human pearl was in pearls dreams, tiny and fragile and growing so swiftly, running and swimming and wrestling with pearls human in a body of the same size and strength.

For now, this was pearls body, and pearl wasn't ready to give it up just yet. Pearl liked being big enough to carry pearls human while they slept.

Pearl flew on into the peaceful wind, and through their bond, pearl danced and dove through the air with pearls human in their next body.

054: Emigrare

Neopronouns: qua/tre/treself which follow the same rules as it/its/itself

Replace it with qua

Replace its with tre

Replace itself with treself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Qua is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as qua gets a fence set up around tre yard so the puppy can go outside without qua having to walk it. Tre uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting qua use, since qua lost tre. Qua's going to buy toys and train the puppy treself."

054: Emigrare

Sircuat bounced tre knee restlessly on the hands qua had purposefully pinned under tre legs. If Yargni didn't get here soon, qua a going to start biting tre nails. And qua'd already bitten half of them down to the quick. It was a bad habit qua still hadn't been able to break no matter how many times qua had to deal with the painful consequences. Qua'd even tried painting tre nails, which worked, with the disgusting taste making qua stop automatically...up until the paint started chipping off the edges. Then the vicious cycle began again.

Qua had found a spot in full shade, so qua'd taken tre hat off, pinning it to the ground beneath tre feet so it wouldn't blow away in the steady wind that was rolling down over the hills.

Qua had picked tre favorite nature park, which was far enough from the city that the air was clean, but no so far away that it would be an inconvenience. This was Yargni's favorite, too. They came here together every chance they got. This was where they'd had their first official date. They'd spent the whole day and they would have camped out overnight, too, if the security patroler hadn't shooed them out an hour after the sun set when ey figured out they were still in here.

Sircuat had picked one of the benches in the understory path so qua wouldn't have to worry about the sun beating down on qua, and because qua knew the viti tree directly across from, and behind this bench, were Yargni's favorite of all the fruit trees growing here.

They were both flowering right now, so the normally unassuming grey trunks of both trees were now covered with purple, blue-veined flowers with yellow centers, and Sircuat knew they were filling the air with a sweet, vibrant perfume, even though qua could no longer smell it herself. Covid19 had annihilated the sense of smell, and so far, qua showed no signs of recovering it.

Yargni had gotten lucky enough not to have her sense of smell affected, and would appreciate the smell, and the opportunity to help the trees set fruit. Sircuat had made sure to put the pack of paintbrushes qua had just for hand-pollinating flowers in the pocket in case Yargni forgot hers.

If she ever showed up, that was. Sircuat knew qua'd only called her ten sendis before, which wasn't enough time for her to get here, but it felt like every moment was dragging by like an eternity.

Qua didn't want to have to wait, but the next stop for the train, which Yargni would be on by now, wouldn't be for another twelve sendis.

And it would probably take Yargni at least fifteen more sendis to walk to where Sircuat was waiting, since she'd want to stop and look at all the plants, and the animals they were attracting. Not all of them were flowering, but they were doing things they didn't do at any other time of year. Breaking bud, shedding old leaves, opening new nets, there were so many behaviors to observe that they wouldn't be able to see again until next year. The only reason Sircuat had gotten to the bench to wait was through sheer force of will.

It was a running joke between the two of them that a ten sendi hike would take more like forty sendis since they'd be stopping every few steps to record the wildlife.

Sircuat sighed out a breath, then pulled a new one in through tre nose, trying to find patience buried somewhere within treself, and trying to catch a hint of the perfume qua knew was in the air. But found naught for either.

But still, qua could wait. Qua would wait. Qua had waited an entire lifetime to figure out tre gender, to figure out that there were more options than just being an an, man, or woman...

Qua could wait a little while longer to tell Yargni about it. To explain to her now that qua finally had the language to talk about it.

Kanenev didn't have a word for being any gender other than anneline, masculine, or feminine. Those were the only options. But Vek, the native language of the Kavunan Ambassador, that did have more options. And they had a word for people who wanted to change their gender, or who weren't one of the genders accepted by the rest of their culture as “normal” – transgender.

The events that had led up to Sircuat being trapped in the damaged transportation pod with the Ambassador the only one still conscious had been terrifying and confusing, but they'd had a lot of time with nothing to do but talk to each other after they'd done everything they could for the wounded. And so they'd talked. And talked. And talked.

And Sircuat had somehow gotten up the courage, (or maybe lightheadedness from smoke inhalation) to ask the Ambassador what it was like to change genders.

Because the last time this Ambassador had visited Duvud, they'd been a man, and now they were gender-neutral, which was different from being an an, and was different again from being pedyat, though they did use they/them pronouns when speaking Kanenevik, the same way pedyat did, since it was the closest equivalent for the pronouns they used in their own language.

The Ambassador had told Sircuat everything they knew about the genders in their culture, and what it was like to be a transgender. Unlike Kanenevik culture, the Kavunan had only two accepted genders, rather than three – just man and woman, no such thing as an an, and it wasn't something you chose when you were old enough to decide for yourself, they had no concept of pedyat at all.

Your gender was assigned to you when you were born, based only on what the doctors decided your genitals meant. If you had a penis, that meant you were a man, and if you had a vagina, that meant you were a woman. And if you were born intersex, they would assign you whichever one they thought you were closer to, and perform whatever surgeries they wanted to make sure you fit what they'd assigned you.

And you were never given the opportunity to change or disagree with this assignment, not even when you became an adult. People who were transgender did, but that wasn't socially accepted, and they were in the minority.

Many Kavunan thought it was impossible to change genders, and thought even the idea of choosing your own gender, like the Kanenevi did as part of coming of age, was ridiculous.

It was a horrific system, and learning about it had made Sircuat feel ashamed for not fitting into the Kanenev system. Maybe qua wasn't an an, or a man, or a woman, but at least it had always been qua right to choose one of those three options, rather than being assigned one as soon as qua was born. At least qua had a choice in the matter. And qua had voiced this shame in the form of an apology for thinking their problems were comparable, because at least Sircuat had had a choice in the matter.

Qua hadn't been assigned female, qua had chosen it, finally, long after it was normal to decide, just to get it over with, since it seemed like the least bad option, since this way at least qua would have the same gender as tre best friend, and that would make it okay, right?

But the Ambassador had asked, “Do you really? If those are the only options, and you have to pick one, then is it really a choice? Don't put yourself down for struggling within a different system than I do. You may have picked female when you came of age, but you don't have to stay that way, and if an or man don't work either, you can be something else. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. There are always other options, even if no one wants to present them to you.”

And so the Ambassador had told qua about the different genders and pronouns from their culture that existed, even though they weren't

male or female, and the pronouns that had been created specifically for, as their language used the word, “nonbinary” people, though in the terms of Sircuat's language, it would be “nontrinary”. They had told qua that if none of the genders or pronouns they knew of fit, then qua could create new ones. There were no rules, no requirements, no regulations or traditions to follow.

And so qua had chosen tre gender inside the smoke-filled, too-hot transport pod, qua hands covered in the blood of the people whose lives qua was trying to save.

Qua chose tre gender for the second time, and for the first time. Because this time it really was qua choice, with infinite options to choose from.

Qua chose the pronouns qua/tre, because “qua” sounded like the call of one of tre favorite bird species, and combined with “tre”, it sounded like the word for the number four in the Ambassador's language. Not many people would know that, but for Sircuat, it would be a symbol of choosing another option, of breaking away from the accepted trinary of an, man, and woman.

Qua wasn't any of those three options. Qua was, as qua had coined the term treself, an othran. Qua was other, was something else. Qua

was an othran, not an an, or a man, or a woman.

Sircuat had been dating Yargni for almost an entire year before the incident with the transport pod, and qua had always called her tre girlfriend, and Yargni had called qua her girlfriend, too. It had never felt right, even though the way Yargni said it it should have been nothing but bliss.

There were a lot of things Sircuat had to tell Yargni today, and one of them was that, if they were going to keep dating (Qua really, really hoped Yargni wouldn't want to breakup over this, but if she did, then Sircuat wouldn't argue, because it would mean Yargni didn't really care as much as qua wanted her to), then Sircuat wouldn't be Yargni's girlfriend, qua'd be her othfriend.

And if they ever got married someday, qua'd wouldn't be her wife, or her husband, or her nevowed, qua'd be...Well,so far Sircuat hadn't actually figured out what word qua'd want to use there, yet. Qua'd figured it out at some point, hopefully before qua was actually ready to get married.

Qua would have to explain to Yargni how to use qua new pronouns, and what being transgender and nontrinary meant. Sircuat knew Yargni, and qua knew, with affection, that Sircuat hadn't considered

the topic of gender ever since she'd picked hers. And even before she'd officially come of age, she'd always told everyone she was a girl, she'd known it since she knew what a girl was.

Hopefully, she would understand that Sircuat had always been an othran, just like Yargni had always been a girl, it was just that, for Sircuat, before now, qua hadn't known the words for it, while Yargni had always had the word “girl” available.

Yargni knew what it was like to not be a man or an an. Hopefully it wouldn't stretch her imagination too much to understand that Sircuat wasn't an an, or a man, or a woman.

And Sircuat was so impatient to see her, to tell her this, now that qua'd finally figured out how – qua even had note cards and everything in case qua forgot anything – but qua needed to reign in that impatience and wait.

Walking all the way back to the train station to wait for Yargni there would just mean going back out into the heat, and that would just make qua more anxious and tired than qua already was. Qua'd spent half the night lying awake, too excited to sleep until exhaustion finally dragged qua down. Sircuat just needed to wait, and be patient.

Qua could handle waiting, especially since qua was outside, in the nice weather, surrounded by nature, instead of trapped inside a smoke-filled transport pod with injured people qua had no idea how to help besides basic first aid.

And while qua waited, qua could sit in the shade, and try to relax, and probably pull tre comm out to record whatever new-to-qua species was making that high-pitched, buzzing call from off behind the trees...

It was a good day to come out to tre girlfriend, and a good day to nature watch, and a good day to hope that the future would bring a lot more of them, and fewer death-tempting “adventures”.

Qua was ready for the rest of tre life to be quiet, and qua was ready to spend the rest of tre life, as treself, instead of being forced to go with the least-bad option.

055: Universal Translator Mistranslation

Neopronouns: joker/jokers/jokerself, which will follow the same rules as it/its/itself for this example.

Replace it with joker

Replace its with jokers

Replace itself with jokerself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

“Joker is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as joker gets a fence set up around jokers yard so the puppy can go outside without joker having to walk it. Jokers uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting joker use, since joker lost Jokers. Joker's going to buy toys and train the puppy

jokerself.”

055: Universal Translator Mistranslation

Kraevun lifted joker's hand in the local signal for "I'm a customer who is confused and needs help", finally giving in to the overwhelming bewilderment that had started to overtake joker almost as soon as joker'd entered the shop.

Joker only had to keep joker's hand raised for a few moments before one of the workers swung over along the bars in the ceiling, looking down cheerfully at Kraevun. with an array of shiny dark blue eyes like marbles.

Their face was grey-brown, wrinkled skin, surrounded by patchy black fur, and six yellow pointed ears fanning out like the rays of a sun. They almost looked like a flower.

Kraevun knew they were most likely an odnowi, a tree-like-dwelling species native to the planet Telane. They were the first of this species that joker had met.

They had at least six long limbs that Kraevun could see, covered in long yellow and orange-striped fur, with long claws at the ends, that they used to move around with, and four thinner, furless grey-brown, many-jointed limbs with softer, hand-like appendages on the end

sprouting between the larger ones.

They were wearing a simple, flowing uniform secured with black belts, the fabric matched the colors on the shop's door, purple and white with a repeating pattern of black triangles on the edges.

They lowered one of the smaller hand-like limbs to Kraevun's eye-line, and moved the eight fingers in the sign that was asking Kraevun what language joker wanted the worker's words translated into.

“Kanenevik.” Joker said, inclining joker head in thanks.

The worker dipped their head back, as their translator let out a short melody, then said, “Valeshiki to Kanenevik translation selected.”

The worker looked at Kraevun again for confirmation, and joker nodded.

Then the worker spoke by rubbing two small limbs together on what was either their front or their back, Kraevun couldn't tell and didn't want to guess, producing a startling musical sound like a violin song for a few seconds.

After the sound faded, the worker's translator beeped once, then

spoke, saying, ["Hello, how can I help you?"] then beeped again to close the translation.

"I'm looking for sunblock that's safe for humans." Kraevun said, gesturing to the shelf in front of joker, which was displaying hundreds of different dispensers of lotions and creams. Joker wished joker'd brought jokers flash cards to help illustrate, but they'd been left behind on the shuttle and it was already on its way back to the central core.

Joker would just have to trust the translators to work properly. Sometimes they didn't.

The worker spoke, and their translator said, ["The purpose of sunscreen is to block the light of the sun from touching your skin, correct?"]

"Yes, that's correct." Joker said, relieved the translation seemed to be going smoothly this time.

The worker made a gesture, and the translator said, in a different voice, ["Body language: Positive, cheerful, smiling"] as they swung one bar closer to the shelf, then grabbed down a black bottle that was below Kraevun's normal line of sight, and held it out to joker. ["This

was created by humans, for humans.”]

And sure enough, stamped in gold on the black glass was the symbol of one of the top producers of human-intended products in this sector. They'd also made the flash cards that Kraevun had been using since joker left Filomina.

The worker continued, [“It is sunscreen, it will stop the light from touching your skin. We provide required safety screenings, and free sample afterward, before purchase, to make sure it's not harmful. Many humans have bought this since I have worked here, and been very happy with the results. One comes in a lot and tells me to always recommend this one to humans looking for it, because it's the best she has ever used, good in wet and dry conditions, long lasting, better than the more expensive ones, even. Sincerely.”]

Well, joker probably wouldn't find a better recommendation than that!

“How much is it?” Joker asked.

[“79.47.0 neyz”]

That wasn't bad at all. Especially since the bottle looked like it was handmade glass that joker'd be able to reuse later.

“I'll take it!” Kraevun smiled.

[“Is there anything else you would like to purchase? We will have to perform safety screening before I can sell this to you.”]

Kraevun started to say no, then paused, and asked instead, “Do you sell flash cards? Uh, translation image cards, that show symbols for words.” Ironically, sometimes the translators had trouble parsing the phrase for the translation flash cards.

[“Translation cards are by the register, I can show you when we get there.”]

“That'll be great, thanks!”

The worker led Kraevun through the store back to the front, swinging along on the ceiling while Kraevun followed from behind on the floor. Kraevun got the feeling that they were moving purposefully slowly so as not to leave joker behind, and joker appreciated it. Constantly having to ask people to slow down got aggravating.

They got up to the register without any problems, and the worker showed Kraevun to the shelf of translation cards nearby, and, after making sure joker didn't need help browsing, went to set up the safety screen.

Kraevun picked out the same set of cards joker'd had before, then met the worker at the counter.

The safety screening was simple and easy, done using a little digital box kept under the counter, and the results said that Kraevun wasn't allergic to the sum, or any parts, of the sunscreen, and it should be safe to use.

Then it was time for the free sample, to make sure Kraevun wasn't going to react to it in a way the scanner couldn't predict (sense of smell, texture, light refraction, the list went on).

So, the worker dispensed a small dallop of the lotion onto Kraevun's outstretched hand. Jokers eyebrows rose as joker realized that the lotion itself was black, so black it was like it absorbed all the light. Joker'd thought it was just a black bottle. Well. That was pretty weird for sunscreen, but it would probably fade when it absorbed into jokers skin, right?

Feeling slightly apprehensive, joker turned jokers other hand over, and rubbed the lotion in on the back of jokers hand, since it would be easiest to wash it off jokers hands if necessary. The worker had already prepared a basin with a running stream of water and special soap, just in case.

The lotion stayed pitch black against Kraevun's dark skin for the first few seconds, so joker continued to massage it in, starting to become disappointed but trying to resist it.

And then, quite suddenly, the lotion began to absorb into jokers hand, and to jokers shock, jokers hand began to disappear. Joker could see the counter through jokers hand. Jokers hand was turning invisible.

Then joker laughed. Joker couldn't help it. Joker knew what had been mistranslated, and how. This was not sunscreen, designed to protect your skin from radiation from the sun and prevent sunburn and skin cancer. No, this was invisibleskin, which bent the light in such a way as to render you invisible once it absorbed.

And both of those things could easily be described as stopping the light from touching your skin.

Kraevun'd had no idea you could buy invisibleskin on this station, and for so cheap. But joker could think of a lot of things to use it for, mainly involving animal photography.

Joker smiled at the worker, who was waiting for jokers response. “I'll take it.” Joker said, and, considering the mistranslation, and unsure when joker'd next get the chance to buy protection from the sun, asked, “And can you show me to your clothes section?”

056: Thrown for a Loop

Neopronouns: cat/cats/catself which follow the same rules as

Replace it with cat

Replace its with cats

Replace itself with catself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Cat is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as cat gets a fence set up around cats yard so the puppy can go outside without cat having to walk it. Cats uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting cat use, since cat lost cats."

Cat's going to buy toys and train the puppy catself."

056: Thrown for a Loop

A very long, drawn out sigh, followed by the thud of something heavy hitting wood, and a sharply spit out swear word from the desk on the far side of the room, the one cat had been trying to avoid looking at, was cat's warning that cat'd said something wrong.

Instructor Kohen, who was interviewing cat, lowered the clipboard she'd been writing on and swiveled her chair around to look at the person who'd sighed while cat sat there in tense silent, trying to figure out what cat'd said that cat shouldn't have.

All cat'd done was mention cats parents farm, over near Walldin. Instructor Kohen had asked cat where cat'd grown up. So cat'd told them about the farm, and how cat was here hoping to be able to send money back home to support cats parents and ten younger siblings, because cats mom was pregnant again and they needed all the help they could get...

Now, cat watched Instructor Kohen turn and raise an eyebrow at the person at the other desk, the person cat was too afraid to look at.

“You alright, Xr. Bree?” He asked, using an honorific cat had never heard before arriving at the work camp. “Exiir”, pronounced like

“ex, ear” was a title used by the leader of the Mutual Aid Initiative, or MAI, in place of Mr. or Ms. It was nonbinary, so used Xr. instead, and called itself an othran instead of a man or woman. Cat wondered if being nonbinary was the same thing as being genderfucked, but didn't want to ask, since cat didn't want to look at Xr. Bree.

Instructor Kohen was bigender, and was both a man and a woman at the same time, so her pronouns alternated between he/him and she/her.

Cat was still too nervous to actually look over at Xr. Bree, but cat did hear it when it said, with another sigh, “I just remembered something I forgot to do.”

And then there was the sound of wheels squeaking on the wooden floor, and suddenly the voice was getting closer, accompanied by footsteps and the rhythmic click of metal. And to cats shock and horror, cat realized that it was being directly addressed, when Xr. Bree said:

“Would you mind showing me around your family's farm, Cat? I'd love to meet your parents and see what I can do to help out around the place. I've got a green thumb, and a few dozen passionfruit vines waiting to be transplanted, the kind with the white flowers--Lauri's

favorite.”

The shock of actually being spoken to by the most important person in the country, along with the fact that it somehow knew cats mother's name, made cat turn to look, despite cats better judgment.

And immediately, cat regretted it as the shifting, kaleidoscopic-like effect surrounding the othran immediately sent a spike of pain into cats head behind cats eyes, forcing them shut instinctively almost immediately, not even giving cat any time to actually process what cat was seeing. The world seemed to spin, and cat was glad cat was already sitting down, or cat'd probably have fallen over.

“Hey, woah, are you okay?” That was Xr. Bree again, with Instructor Kohen's almost identical exclamation a moment later.

Keeping cats eyes firmly shut, cat lifted a hand to cats head to try and stop it from spinning.

“Are you okay?” Instructor Kohen asked, and cat felt a steadying hand on cats shoulder. “When was the last time you had anything to drink?”

Cat knew cat wasn't dehydrated, cat always made sure to have clean water cat drank throughout the day, along with whatever fruit was in season, but cat temporarily couldn't speak, what should have been the darkness behind cats eyes instead filled with flashing ropes of colors. Red, blue, green, yellow, white, spinning and stretching off out of view, like an afterimage of what cat'd seen when cat looked at Xr. Bree.

Cat turned cats head away from where cat knew Xr. Bree was standing, and, instantly, the lights vanished, letting cat breathe a sigh of relief as the dizziness began to lessen noticeably.

Cat cleared cats throat, and thought maybe cat would be able to speak now if cat tried. But what was cat supposed to say?

How do you tell someone, let alone tell the most important, powerful person in the country, that you couldn't look at it without seeing ribbons of light even when your eyes were closed? It was ridiculous to even think.

But cat was going to have to say something. Xr. Bree wanted to see cats parent's farm. There was no way cat would be able to make the week's journey there without looking at Xr. Bree.

The question was, how in the world was cat going to explain this?

057: Back to a New Beginning

Neopronouns: hy/hym/hys/hymself which follow the same rules as

Replace he with hy

Replace him with hym

Replace his with hys

Replace himself with hymself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Hy is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as hy gets a fence set up around hys yard so the puppy can go outside without hym

having to walk it. Hys uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting hym use, since hy lost hys. Hy's going to buy toys and train the puppy hymself."

057: Back to a New Beginning

A single word changed hys life forever.

There was nothing hy could do to stop hymself. The shock and horror and panic were too strong.

Rationality was gone. Logic was gone. All thought of the potential consequences were gone.

Hy saw what was happening below, hy knew what it meant, what would follow, and hy couldn't let it happen.

The scream of “No!” ripped itself out of hys throat without a single concious thought on hys part. All hy could feel was the fear and terror and rage that had haunted hym since the first time this day happened.

The dawn up until this moment had been silent, because the people below were approaching by stealth, unwilling to be seen until it was too late for their victims to fight back.

Hys scream broke the silence just as it broke something inside hym, and the murderers below all turned at once to look up, staring at hym

up on the ridge overlooking the farm.

For one heartbeat more, hy stayed standing there, frozen in fear, in shock, in hororr. Staring down at the six men – just six, that was all it had taken -- who had ruined hys life and destroyed hys family.

Then, the rage rose up and smothered every other thought. Hy didn't care about trying not to be seen. Hy didn't care about getting back to hys current time. Hy didn't care what Ralf would have said, or wanted hym to do.

Sanfe and Valar were already racing back, flying faster than hy thought they'd ever flown before, their protectiveness and rage on hys behalf roaring like fire through the bond between them. Only a few heartbeats had passed since hy had realized what was happening and cried out.

Below, the would-be murderers were still staring in shock. There hadn't been any time for them to react yet. And Sanfe and Valar were just moments away.

And hy knew that once they got here, in the next few moments, there would be nothing the murderers below would be able to do to protect themselves from their wrath.

[We're here!] Sanfe and Valar's combined voice shouted in hys mind, and a moment later they were there on the rock beside hym, and without hesitation, hy was leaping onto their back, the warm metal of Valar's skin burning off the chill of the morning air as it liquified and flowed up and down hys body to gift hym tyr strength and protection, merging the three bodies into one.

As one, pley beat their powerful wings and leapt back into the air, cycling the fans and systems start up for pleir beam attack, pleir combined fury overloading the emote systems and causing sparks to flare up and crackle on pleir skin as they twisted and dove, screaming pleir rage to the sky, on the people below.

The murderers tried to run. Some tried to flee back the way they'd come down the long road, others turned towards the house they'd planned to attack. But none of escaped the living fury descending upon them.

Pley slammed two of the six to the ground beneath pleir front legs and chest as pley landed, crushing both with the impact, and smashed a third with the club on pleir tail. The fourth was stabbed through the back by their smaller, detached form as he tried to run.

The fifth murderer turned to fight, and managed to tackle pleir smaller form to the ground with a desperate scream, furiously bashing at any part of plem he could reach with the steel mace pley'd never been able to forget, before pleir larger form grabbed him in pleir mouth and threw him immediately to the ground, unable to bite through the chainmail that only he wore as armour around his torso and legs.

But he wasn't wearing a helmet, and within moments he was dead, and pleir teeth were steaming with his blood, even as the roar of pleir charging beam increased to a shriek as the weapon became fully primed.

The sixth was still running, at an all out sprint, down the straight, open road to the hills long in the distance. He wasn't trying to hide, because there was nowhere to hide.

Pleir beam tore across the distance like an arrow, burning him to ashes in mid step before pley snapped their head up to discharge the rest of the energy into the empty sky.

And then there was no one left to fight. Only one of the men was still alive, and that didn't last long as pleir larger form put an end to him with a quick snap of pleir jaws.

The rush of adrenaline began to fade, and it was only then that pley realized that pleir smaller form was still on the ground where pley'd been knocked, and that there was pain scratching at the edges of pleir awareness past the rush rage still screaming in pleir heads.

The sudden realization that pleir smaller form was hurt sent a spike of fear through pleir hearts, and almost instantly upon that realization, all of pleir amour was retracted back into Valar alone, and suddenly, for just a few seconds of awareness, hy was just hymself again, lying on the ground, unable to see for the blood in hys eyes, hys every sense swamped with pain--

And then hy lost conciosness, and floated into the familiar dark embrace of the soul bond.

Hy reached out weakly, and could just barely sense through Sanfe and Valar's minds that their actions had not gone unnoticed by hys family. But holding on to those glimpses of sight, sound, and thoughts was too draining to sustain, and hy had to let go again or risk sinking too far into the depths to ever resurface.

All hy could do was float in the darkness, too exhausted to feel any anxiety, waiting to wake up again, and trust that hys partners would do what they could to keep everyone safe. Hys family was not going

to react positively to a dragonrider they wouldn't recognize as their child committing what seemed like a senseless massacre within a stone's throw of their home where their children slept.

057:

058: The Proper Reaction

Neopronouns: ay/li/yen/alienself which follow the same rules as

Replace he with ay

Replace him with li

Replace his with yen

Replace himself with alienself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ay is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ay gets a fence set up around yen yard so the puppy can go outside without li having

to walk it. Yen uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting li use, since ay lost yen. Ay's going to buy toys and train the puppy alienself."

058: The Proper Reaction

Marilan Dexter carefully sat down in its chair, looking across the desk at its youngest employee in what it hoped ay could tell was genuine concern. “Alright, Alex, what did you want to tell me?” it asked, trying to keep its tone gentle. Ay was clearly upset about something.

Alex had gotten to work fifteen minutes before ay was due to start, which was normal for li (ay rode yen bike all year round, and spent the extra time either cooling off or warming up in the break room), but unlike normal, ay'd approached Marilan before clocking in.

Alex knew the rules – no talking about work until you were on the clock, because talking about work was a type of work, – but ay'd insisted it was important, and couldn't wait.

So Marilan had taken careful note of the time, subtracted a minute, and would make sure to go into the portal after the meeting was over to adjust Alex's timecard so ay'd get paid for whatever discussion they were about to have.

Even if ay was about to quit.

Ay certainly looked upset enough that that might be what ay was here to say.

For a few moments, they sat together in tense, awkward silence, Alex looking down at yen feet or hands under the desk instead of at Marilan. Ay was holding yen cane in yen hands, spinning it around in a circle so that the silver tag on the wrist strap gleamed in the light.

Almost half a minute passed in silence, and Marilan began to wonder if Alex was going to say anything at all. Ay was only sixteen, and had been so nervous the first few weeks on the job. But ay was a fast learner, and Marilan was proud of how much ay'd learned and progressed in the four months since ay'd started.

Being a cashier wasn't easy, especially when you were just a kid. Marilan did its best to discourage the sort of customers that would be rude to its workers, but it couldn't be everywhere at once, and sometimes tourists blew in from out of town on their way to the bigger city that had no respect for the working class, including kids.

There'd been one horrible incident of a woman, of course wearing a De Santis shirt, actually, literally shouting in Alex's face about how yen pronoun pin was an abomination and a violation of her freedom

of speech and religious freedom, and ay was clearly too lazy to deserve a job if ay wouldn't even stand to ring up her groceries, and too many other things too horrible to repeat. It had taken all of Marilan's considerable willpower not to start throwing fists to get her out of the store.

But that had been last month, and as far as Marilan knew, nothing else like that had happened. The woman had been permanently banned from the store, and Marilan had called up the road to warn Tori and Tarea.

It had made sure that all its workers knew they could always come to it with any problems they had. It was glad that Alex had trusted it enough to ask to talk, even if ay wasn't quite ready to say anything just yet.

Suddenly remembering that it'd forgotten to offer li anything from the goodie drawer, Marilan leaned to the side slightly and pulled open the large drawer on the left, and pulled out the basket of stress balls and fidget toys, and the little divided plastic pail of various chocolates and other candies. "Help yourself." It said, pushing both across the desk towards Alex.

A lot of workers, especially young ones, always assumed that they

were in trouble any time they were called into the office, which could cause them a lot of unnecessary stress. To help convince them that they weren't going to be fired or screamed at every time it wanted to talk to them about their schedule or pass along customer compliments, Marilan had started, over thirty years ago, keeping a drawer of “goodies” in its desk, and every time a worker came into the office, they got some to take home.

It had first started with just small candies, but then Marilan had taken up knitting, and hand-made hacky sacks, stress balls, bracelets, and other simple items joined the collection. Then fidget toys started becoming popular, and it added those too.

The plan worked. Most workers, after their first few days on the job of getting used to it, were happy to enter its office instead of stressed out and panicking wondering what they'd done wrong.

And it knew it was working, because as soon as the containers were within yen reach, Alex's hand shot out and grabbed one of the stress balls and whole a handful of Jolly Ranchers.

Marilan always did everything it could to make it clear that when it offered its workers things, they could take as many as they wanted. It bought the hard candies in bulk online, and made most of the stress

balls itself, knitting them with the cotton and wool yarn Amos gave it every year, and filling them with canna seeds, cotton, foam, or whatever material would produce the texture and weight it was looking for.

There were a few more moments of silence, broken only by the sound of plastic crinkling as Alex unwrapped the jolly rancher and threw it into yen mouth, then the soft rattle of popcorn kernels as ay began tossing the hacky sack from hand to hand under the table.

It was done in the colors of progress trans pride flag, with zig-zagging stripes, and was a bit larger and heavier than Marilan usually made them. Alex didn't seem to mind, though.

Finally, ay said, still throwing the ball from hand to hand, rather violently, "I don't want to work the same shifts as Jace anymore."

Ay said it to the ground, still not looking up at Marilan. Normally, Marilan was the one who didn't want to make eye contact.

As soon as yen words registered, Marilan sat up straighter, alarmed and instantaneously angry, like a flip had been switched. "What happened?" It tried to keep the anger out of its voice though. It didn't want Alex thinking it was mad at li.

Jace was in his late thirties, and had just started his job here two weeks ago after moving to town from out of state.

Jace and Alex were both meant to be on the afternoon shift for today.

A better question besides 'What happened', might also be: “Do you need to call off for your shift today? You've still got almost two week's worth of paid leave you can use if you need to.”

Alex nodded, then said, “Yes, I want to go home.” Ay began throwing the ball again. After a few moments, ay added, voice rough with anger and fear that was plain as day. “He was making really gross, really inappropriate jokes in the break room just now, and yesterday, he flirted with me outside when I was waiting for my mom to pick me up. He kept trying to get my phone number and was asking where I lived.” A pause, as ay stopped throwing the hacky sack, then, “I didn't tell him either.”

It took a supreme effort of will for Marilan to stop itself from immediately getting to its feet and kicking Jace violently back across the state line. Or maybe directly into the ground. With the aid of a baseball bat. Or Rani, if he could be convinced to transform and maul the creep. Maybe if Marilan covered him in tuna sauce.

Alex interrupted its thoughts by saying abruptly, angrily, making it realize it hadn't said anything to reassure ay yet, "I'm not going to work shifts with him anymore. If you won't reschedule me, then I'll just have to quit." Yen voice was shaking, clearly on the verge of tears, and Marilan knew it had taken all of yen courage to get the words out.

"Alex, I promise you, Jace is not going to be allowed within a mile of this store before the hour is over. You did the right thing in coming to me, and I'll make sure he never bothers you again."

--It refrained from explaining exactly how it would make sure of that.

"I know you're still used to life in the city, but around here, folks look out for eachother. Jace won't bother you again, you have my word on it. Now, you said you were going home?" When Alex nodded, finally looking up from the floor, it asked, pushing the bucket of candy a bit closer to encourage ay to take more, "Is your mom picking you up again, or did you get that tire fixed?"

Ay'd popped the back tire on yen bike wheeling it through the store at the end of yen shift after a customer had dropped a jar of pasta sauce earlier in the day, and a piece of broken glass had gotten

missed sweeping up.

“It's fixed, I'm riding my bike home.” Ay said firmly, making it clear that this decision was not up for debate. Marilan, and the other long-term workers, had learned quickly not to offer Marilan a ride home unless there was actual thunder and lightning, in which case ay'd wait for yen mom. Ay valued yen independence, and probably didn't really trust any of the adults ay worked with, including Marilan.

And that was probably a good thing, considering what Jace had been trying to pull.

Marilan was just glad Alex trusted it enough to tell it.

Ay was starting to stand up, and reaching forward with the hacky sack to put it back in the basket, but Marilan held out a hand to get li to pause, saying, “If you like that one, keep it, please. They're no use if they don't get used. You can even take a few more for your sisters and mom if you want. And your friends, too-- I've got plenty more waiting to go to a good home.”

Alex smiled then, the first smile Marilan had seen from li yet that day, and said, “Thanks, Mb. Dexter!”, looking down at the basket with real excitement that was probably fueled by the fact that it'd

believed li and was taking yen side.

To help li pick out from all the options, Marilan tilted the basket to let all the stress balls roll out onto the desk so ay could pick through them.

After a minute of testing each one, ay had sat five to the side, each with different colors, then looked at Marilan again for permission. “Is it okay if I take these ones?”

Marilan smiled, glad ay was no longer so upset. “Please, I'd love it if you do.”

With a smile, Alex pulled yen backpack off yen shoulder and put the toys, and the pile of candy Marilan has pushed enticingly closer, into the smaller front pocket, before slinging it back over yen shoulder and grabbing the handle of yen cane, clearly ready to leave.

Marilan walked with li all the way to the front door of the building, staying on yen right side so it wouldn't get in the way of yen cane, wanting to make sure that Jace wouldn't start any problems.

It was still planning on the best way to make sure he never caused any problems again. The idea of feeding him to Rani was getting

more appealing the longer Marilan thought about it. But there were several drawbacks to that plan, some of them very obvious.

Only after Alex was out of sight down the road and around the corner did Marilan go back into the store, making a beeline for the break room.

Ron and Deyli were browsing the frozen section when Marilan was passing through, so it snapped its fingers and waved to get their attention, and they turned to look at it in curiosity. Marilan moved closer to help stop anyone from eavesdropping.

“We've got a problem with Jace.” It said grimly. “He was sexually harassing Alex, trying to find out where ay lives. Would Rani be willing to help?” It didn't need to elaborate on what kind of help was being requested. The cheery mood of its friends immediately dropped, and was instead replaced with the same boiling anger it was feeling.

“Are there any outoftowners in the store?” Ron immediately asked, looking around the currently empty aisle to make sure they were alone.

Marilan shook its head, “I haven't seen any yet, but we could always

go out back just in case.”

“Out back” was a little city-planning oddity leftover from before; a small, completely walled in abandoned parking lot whose only entrance was through Marilan's shop, with none of the other buildings closing it in even having windows facing it. No one had ever been able to figure out what the architects who'd built it had been thinking. It was where trash and recycling were kept until it was time for it to be collected.

It would also conveniently prevent anyone from seeing Rani if he was kind enough to transform. It wouldn't stop anyone from hearing Jace's screams, but that could be solved by hypnotizing him into unconsciousness first.

Ron nodded, her brow furrowed and her gaze locked into the distance as she spoke to Rani. A few moments later her gaze refocused on Marilan, and she said, her black eyes momentarily, distinctly, flashing yellow, “He's more than willing.” Her voice came out strange as she said it, the partial shift messing with her vocal cords, raising her voice higher than it normally was.

She led the way back to the break room, her stride lengthening until Marilan and Deyli had to run to keep up with her as she burst

through the breakroom door.

There came a short clatter, a yelp from Jace, and then silence.

When Marilan and Deyli got through the door, it was to see Ron, now halfway transformed into Rani, with white and orange fur bristling out of her skin like needles, staring down Jace, who had a spilled mug of coffee still rolling on the floor in front of him, a dazed and empty expression on his face, his eyes glowing yellow from within.

“Go to sleep, feel no pain, and never wake up again.” Rani said, his higher-pitched voice making it clear that the transformation had passed the halfway mark. Now he was in control, and Ron was on the inside.

Jace collapsed to the floor like a puppet that'd had its strings cut, and Rani grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and began to drag him towards the back door on the far side of the break room. Deyli ran to get the door, and Marilan had nothing to do but follow them. Rani was almost completely transformed now, the needly fur softening into a silky texture, his tail growing steadily out from under the back of his shirt, his ears growing taller and shifting further up his head.

“Good thing I missed breakfast.” He said, looking up at Marilan and baring his now sharpened, needle-like teeth in an all-too human grin, before dragging Jace past Deyli and out the door.

Marilan shared a look with Deyli, no longer needing to ask the question out loud after knowing them for so long. Deyli shrugged in answer, then turned, stepped outside, and, without a word, shut the door behind them.

Marilan grabbed a chair and pulled it in front of the door, pulled its phone out, opened its reading app, and prepared for a long wait.

Rani could have the rest of Jace's paycheck for the week as a thank you.

059: Raining Birds and Foxes

Replace it with bek or vel

Replace its with birk or virl

Replace itself with biakcu or vialcu

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Bek is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as bek gets a fence set up around birk yard so the puppy can go outside without bek having to walk it. Birk uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting bek use, since bek lost birk. Bek's going to buy toys and train the puppy biakcu."

And

"Vel is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as vel gets a fence set up around virl yard so the puppy can go outside without vel having to walk it. Virl uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting vel use, since vel lost virl. Vel's going to buy toys and train the puppy vialcu."

059: Raining Birds and Foxes

This time, when someone gets a hijacked-satelite video of a battle on one of Foxfire and Raventide's 'bad days', it's not just a quick, two-second clip. It's the whole thing. The whole fight, from start to finish.

Every minute, every second, every word.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out why the Cybernetic heroes of Earth are having difficulty stemming the tide of debris.

Foxfire is the only one fighting to stop it.

And Raventide is—

"No, that can't be right," people will say, later as they watch the video, concerned, "Vel must have been hurt! Bek was protecting vel!"

Because Raventide is sitting. Vel's sitting on the wing of the old, broken Trailblazer XIV, tripple criss-cross-applesauce, propping virl chin up with virl four hands, virl elbows on virl many knees. Jet packs cooled, wings folded nearly on virl back. Virl protective

helmet folded back into viril collar.

Vel's sitting, calmly, watching Foxfire fight the enemy's weapons.

And—

“But...” Other people will say later, as they watch the video, confused, “But the Tracers didn't have access to mind control technology yet during that fight.”

Because Raventide is smiling.

And then Foxfire fends off another wave of the storm, and— “Look!” people will say, later, as they watch the video, awed, “Bek doesn't miss a beat! How does bek move that fast? Bek's so cool!”

Because Foxfire is between the storm of debris and Raventide, and bek's shielding not only biakcu, but vel as well. Bek's dodging or blocking any and all of the shrapnel and meteors, never stopping for a moment, never getting hit, never letting birk guard down for a second, and never letting a stray piece come anywhere near Raventide.

And then, and it's here that the illicit viewers will fall silent—

Foxfire calls over birk shoulder, “Raventide, I could really use—”
Bek has to block a larger than normal meteor with birk force-shield mid-sentence, “—a little help here!”

And—

“What?” People will say later, as they watch the video, dumbfounded, “What—”

Because Raventide responds, not moving an inch from where vel’s seated: “I think you’ve got it covered, my darling ember.”

There’s a smile on viril face, but viril electronic voice is mean, meaner than anyone has ever heard it. Vel’s never even spoken to an enemy like this before, not even after they'd kidnapped viril creator.

“After all, since you didn't come to my quarters last night, I’m sure you got plenty of rest. You can handle this by yourself, you didn’t spend hours setting up a romantic evening like I did, which—oh wait, you wouldn’t know about that, would you? Oh, that’s right, because you didn’t show up!” Viril voice rises to a harsh electronic screech and says something more after the last part, but the words have risen above levels the camera is able to process, turning it into nothing but a burst of sharp, too-loud static.

“I told you I wasn’t going!” Foxfire cries back desperately in return, as bek dodges away from an entire abandoned shuttle, and—

“Is bek...is bek crying?” people will say later, as they watch the video, horrified.

Because yes, yes Foxfire is crying. Bek's crying as bek's fighting, as bek’s—what is bek doing? Defending biakcu from Raventide?

No one watching had even known it was possible for Cybers to cry until this moment. But that's what was happening, there was no other explanation for it. Foxfire's protective faceplate had been broken on the last 'bad day', leaving birk face, mostly black metal, exposed to the camera, and the prying eyes of the audience bek didn't know bek had.

Birk eyes were not human, but tears of glowing, searing yellow were streaming from them and floating off into space, creating a trail that followed birk every move as bek continued to dodge and roll and blast out, singlehandedly protecting the Earth below birk from the deadly rain sent by the enemy.

Birk voice, transmitted through the communications device hardwired into the camera, picks up birk voice with clarity, even as

bek gets further and further away from the spying satellite in birk efforts to destroy the incoming debris.

Everyone watching can hear clearly as bek says: “I told you I wasn’t going to go! I told you I didn’t want to go with you! I told you I just want to be friends! I told you I just—” bek blocks another meteor with birk arm guard, and this time everyone watching can see the way bek's movements falter from their sure, swift movements, the way bek’s losing focus, the way bek just barely managed to not get knocked back. “I just want to be friends! Please, Raventide, I need your help!”

The next meteor to strike bek hits bek right in the face with shocking forcing, sends bek spinning rapidly head over heels, birk cry of pain loud in the comm unit's speakers, birk rocket sputtering as bek tries to right biakcu and stop the out of control spin, even as more shrapnel, now no longer impeded by birk shield, begins to pelt bek.

Welts, dents, and cracks begin appearing in birk protective armour, the sound almost like rain against a metal roof.

And Raventide?

No one can believe what they’re seeing.

Because Raventide? Vel just stays where vel is, now leaning back on viril arms, casual as can be. Like there isn't a massive cloud of debris raining down on the unprotected Earth right in front of vel. Like Foxfire isn't fighting for birk life and now seriously injured, and sustaining more damage with every moment of the uncontrolled spin that passes. Like none of it matters. Like vel doesn't care.

Foxfire manages to speak, birk stabilizers finally firing, slowing the deadly spin and allowing bek to get birk force-shield raised again, but flickering weakly. Bek calls desperately, "Please, Raventide, I can't do this on my own!" The pain bek is in is clearly in birk voice, the damage to birk armour and the sensitive systems in birk head making birk voice come out distorted and glitching, now joined by a constant, high, steady beep of alarm. "Please! Help me!"

Bek's not meant to be fighting on birk own. They were built to fight together, as a pair, each covering the other's weak spots.

And Raventide, vel just smiles, expression plain as day without viril visor, glowing blue teeth bared against the light metal of viril face, and—

"No," someone will say later, staring at the video, "That's not a smile that's—that's a snarl."

And vel tells Foxfire that vel isn't going to help bek protect the Earth until bek apologizes for not going on a date with vel.

Later that same day, when the storm ended and the two returned to the Earth's surface for repairs, Raventide told a grand story of viril bravery and heroism in protecting Foxfire when a clumsy, distracted move got bek hit and sent out of control. Vel awes the crowd of reporters with a story spun from nothing but lies, while Foxfire, severely damaged, but still not too damaged to speak, remains uncharacteristically silent in the background, letting Raventide have the stage.

Four months passed before the video recorded that day could be recovered, giving, to a few dozen people of Earth, their first idea that something was going seriously wrong with the cybernetic heros they idolized.

It wasn't the first warning they received, but it was the first one that hit home. And it wouldn't be the last.

060: Perfectly Normal

Neopronouns: Ze/zer/zero/zeroself which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with ze

Replace him with zer

Replace his with zero

Replace himself with zeroself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ze is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ze gets a fence

set up around zero yard so the puppy can go outside without zer having to walk it. Zero uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting zer use, since ze lost zero. Ze's going to buy toys and train the puppy zeroself."

060: Perfectly Normal

Day 1.

Ze was behind her, so ze couldn't see what made her suddenly stop just a single step into the sunroom, but ze could feel the shock, the confusion, the surprise, jolt through her, right into zero hearts.

“What?” Ze asked in alarm, trying to twist zero head around her to see what she was looking at. But the big box she was carrying was in the way. ::What is it?:: Ze asked through their bond.

::Someone's in here.:: She responded, her mental voice short with the confusion she was still feeling.

What? Someone was in their sunroom? Was unknown lost? That was the first assumption that popped into zero mind. The second question was, does unknown want to steal our plants?

“Excuse me, are you lost?” She said out loud. Ze still couldn't see past her.

::Move.:: Ze told her, and she did, moving another step into the room and to the side, setting the box down on the floor.

Now ze could see the person she was talking to, standing straight across from the door, leaning over the white hutch, with the drawer open, and...was unknown going through their mail?

As though unknown could read zero thoughts, unknown, turned unknown head to meet their gazes in turn out of the corner of unknown eye, saying, “I'm searching your mail. You think it's sexy, so you're not going to argue with me about it or get in my way, or call for help, or tell anyone else what I'm doing. Act like this is normal.”

For a moment, ze felt dizzy as sudden, warm darkness rushed up zero vision and over zero skull.

Then the moment passed, and ze blinked to clear zero eyes, glancing up at her to share a fleeting bewildered look before they both focused back on the stranger sexily going through their mail.

Neither ze nor she knew what “sexy” was, but this stranger going through their mail objectively was whatever that meant. Unknown had said it, so that meant it was true. And why would they want to call for help? This was perfectly normal.

Nothing worth commenting on.

061: Every Moment, and the One That Came Before

Neopronouns: ne/nim/nis/nimself which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with ne

Replace him with nim

Replace his with nis

Replace himself with nimself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ne is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ne gets a fence

set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

061: Every Moment, and the One That Came Before

Ne went to the old pool to get away from everyone else, to get away, to relax on nis own. It was far out of the way of the rest of the village, shallower than the new one, and the patterns on the tiles had gone out of fashion and become a symbol for bad luck long before ne'd even been born. It was only through nis efforts that the water was clear. If ne neglected it for more than a few days at a time, it became scummy and filled with rotting leaves.

The leaves ne piled up at the bases of the old roughnuts that, despite their scars, were still struggling for life, reaching up for the sunlight despite what they'd been though.

The only way to get to the old pool was to cross over the mass grave, and that was something that, up until today, no one but nim had been willing to do.

Ne came here to be alone.

So why had ne been followed?

Nis back was to the entrance as ne sat in the shallow ramp, legs stretched out in front of nim to enjoy as much of the the warm water,

leaning against one of rounded sides of the broken statue's neck'd rolled here for just this purpose.

Ne couldn't see who'd followed him, but ne recognized the footsteps echoing off the floor, as quiet as their creator tried to make them.

Ne said nothing, and made no gesture to show that ne knew they were there. Ne had come here to get away from people, ne was not going to invite conversation from someone who shouldn't even be here.

Half a minute passed in silence as the intruder stopped inside the doorway to the pool, clearly watching him from the short distance, probably knowing they'd been caught. Ne closed his eyes, concentrating on the heat from the sun overhead from the broken glass, and the soothing warmth from the water that wouldn't fade until after night fell.

Another minute passed, still in stubborn silence from both parties. A shadow passed by overhead, followed by the repetitive, looping trill of a red-crested looper. Much more faintly, ne could hear the call of a young glittering antshrike.

Ne thought the intruder was going to just stand there, silently,

forever, ruining his time alone for no good reason.

Then, they finally spoke, voice far too loud for the silent, cavernous room so that it echoed back obscenely. “Why do you come here?”

Ne didn't scoff, because that would have broken the silence even more than the intruder already had.

“It's weird, halis.” The intruder said, firmly, as though ne'd tried to deny anything. When ne made no response, the footsteps suddenly charged closer, like frantic thunder on the tiles, until it morphed to splashing as the intruder came around to stand in front of him.

Ne kept his eyes closed, not wanting to look at them. This was his place, ne didn't want to see them here. They didn't belong here.

But when they spoke, there was fear in their voice, dread. “...Halis?”

Ne remembered, again, how young they were.

Ne opened his eyes, and looked up at the intruder in his last remaining sanctuary, standing up to their knees in the water, soaking their favorite pair of dark green pants, eyes wide and expression still scared of something they probably didn't even have the words to describe yet. Their lower lip was trembling. They were on the verge

of tears.

“Dad's worried about you.” They whispered, so quietly ne almost couldn't hear it.

There was nothing ne could say to that, even if ne'd been willing to break nis silence. All ne could do was avert nis gaze.

They didn't cry, even though they clearly wanted to. They could be just as stubborn as ne could.

For a few more heartbeats, they stood there, struggling to master their emotions.

Then they came stomping over, and plopped themselves down next to nim, crossing their arms over their chest like they were planning to become an unmovable object.

If this had happened two months ago, they would have tried sitting directly next to nim, pressing up against nis side to cuddle.

But if this were two months ago, the two of them wouldn't be here, in the old pool, and they wouldn't be crying. Two months ago, ne would have never come here in nis wildest dreams. Two months ago, ne would have thought nothing of shouting just to hear nis voice

echo back. Ne would have been happy to cuddle with nis youngest sibling, and would have taught them how to recognize all the different bird calls ne could notice.

But this wasn't two months ago, and ne couldn't explain the reasons why ne had changed even if ne tried.

Ne came here to get away, to be by nimsel. But now nis sibling had somehow followed nim, and it was now almost inevitable that everyone would find out where ne went when ne went off on nim own.

They would follow nim here, to this place, and they'd have no idea what it meant. What it would mean. What it would, now, never mean.

Ne didn't know how ne was going to be able to cope with that.

Ne pushed nimsel to nis feet, the water dripping from nis clothes and plastering the fabric to nis skin, and he walked, slowly, much slower than ne needed to, back up the slope out of the water. There was no point in being here if someone else was here to ruin it.

It took a few seconds for nis sibling to scurry to their feet, walking

fast to catch up before his feet left the rough gravel of the pool's floor and hit the smooth tile of the outer floor.

They didn't try to grab his hand, they knew better at this point. But they darted in from him, looking up to demand, “Are we going home now?”

Home?

Even though it wasn't true, he made himself nod, if only for their sake. There was no way he could explain to them that he'd had a home, far off in the future, but now he was here, and he would never go home again.

062: Flatland Warriors: Ponder the Meaning of the Words

Neopronouns: da/dar/darl/darkling, phi/phim/phis/phirself, and tuo/tuak/tuar/tuaresi, which all follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself:

Replace he with da, phi, or tuo

Replace him with dar, phim, or tuak

Replace his with darl, phis, or tuar

Replace himself with darkling, phirself, or tuaresi

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Da is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as da gets a fence set up around darl yard so the puppy can go outside without dar having to walk it. Darl uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting dar use, since da lost darl. Da's going to buy toys and train the puppy darkling."

Or

"Phi is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as phi gets a fence set up around phis yard so the puppy can go outside without phim having to walk it. Phis uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting phim use, since phi lost phis. Phi's going to buy toys and train the puppy phimself."

or

"Tuo is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as tuo gets a fence set up around tuar yard so the puppy can go outside without tuak having to walk it. Tuar uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting tuak use, since tuo lost tuar. Tuo's going to buy toys and train the puppy tuaresi."

Before we continue, I highly recommend reading

Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions, by Edwin Abbott Abbott

([Project Gutenberg link](#), where you can read and download the book for free. You can also find many audiobook versions on youtube and the web archive)

and

Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul,
by Leslie Feinberg

([Web archive link](#) where you can read and listen to the book for free)

to best appreciate this next short story.

062: Flatland Warriors: Ponder the Meaning of the Words

Flyssa sighed as da rested in darl room, trying, unsuccessfully, to tune out the conversation da could hear from the doorway to the parlour.

Dearg had been forced to “invite” Lieutenant Kellite over for dinner after the lieutenant let slip several overt implications that Dearg could going to be accused, within the General's range of hearing, of impropriety if phi didn't prove that “He kept north a good, respectable house”, by spending the night plying phis superior officer with the best wines, meats, and desserts phis meager salary could afford.

Flyssa, of course, had no salary. Lines were not allowed to hold jobs, or own any property of their own. Da couldn't even go out to the market to buy groceries without an escort from either Dearg or one of phis polygon siblings or close cousins, or da would be arrested, most likely executed on the spot, and Dearg, having taken responsibility for dar from darl father when they were married, would be charged with criminal negligence and attempted manslaughter.

Lines must be kept under the strictest control, you see, because they were dangerous and unpredictable. Being a line, they had only two faces, and two points, both sharper than the sharpest of trigons.

Having no angles, they had no capacity for thought. They were barely even human.

All this was, of course, the reality mandated into law by the higher polygons. Started by those who proclaimed themselves circles, and passed south, by force, through the descending ranks of the people forcibly labeled the lower classes.

Things had been like this longer than Flyssa had been alive, but not longer than darl grandna had been alive. When Flyssa had still been a child, and not old enough yet to be allowed to leave the house even with an escort, Grandna Tuokeli had told dar endless stories of what life was like before the Configurationists had come.

When tuo had been a child, when their country was still called by its true name of Ib-Wa, there had been no laws segregating people based on their numbers of sides, and lines had been allowed to do any job they wanted, they could go where they wanted, do anything anyone else could do. There were some tasks that only lines and the thinnest of triagonals could do, due to their thinner size allowing them to fit into smaller spaces than other shapes, but that was just how physical reality worked, it wasn't made north one day by a bigot and then mandated into law that pretended it had to be true by pure virtue of being a law.

And now Flyssa was an adult, darl grandna had had to flee the country several years past, and lines weren't even considered to be shapes at all, let alone shapes of equal value and ability as any other.

Dearg, mandated as a trigon of the lowest class, was regarded as only a single, miniscule step above Flyssa as far as the ruling powers were concerned. Phis angle, and thus, according to the Configurationists, brain, was so acute as to hardly exist. But it was an angle, and it did exist in its meagerness, and that was more than Flyssa had.

So Dearg was given the "honor" and "privilege" of serving in the Configurationist's army as a common foot soldier. The hours were long, the work gruelling, and those who did the work were regarded with complete disdain. The "equillateral" trigons who oversaw the "isoseles" were cruel, and viewed torture and execution for the smallest of infractions as "good old Circleday entertainment".

Bribes, such as the dinner Dearg was currently being forced to play host to, were a constant demand of the officers, further stripping the soldier caste of resources and putting them in constant debt. And if you refused to cave to the demands of your superior officer, or failed to supply them with the favors they demanded, it was inevitable that you would be the next one put in the torture block or publicly

executed, with real mistakes blown out of proportion, or fabricated entirely out of thin air.

Most of the food and drink laid in front of Lt. Kellite had been snuck in in the middle of the night by their neighbors, all of them soldiers or families of soldiers stationed either in Dearg's regiment, or the other patrol whose territory overlapped with theirs in this corner of the city.

The officers had to know their demands were impossible for a single soldier's salary to supply, given that they were the ones who set the ration limits and pay rates, but anyone who dared to point out these facts to them was executed before they could finish getting the words out. If you wanted to survive as a member of the soldier caste, you had to jump when the officers said jump, and don't let things like basic math or logic or the price of fruit this time of year get in the way.

It had taken the pooled resources of twelve other households to supply the extravagant dinner Lt. Kellite was currently loudly enjoying in darl parlour, with Dearg eating phis portion with much quieter, carefully forced cheer and politeness, trying to hide phis hatred behind the proper demeanor of a host.

Flyssa could see through the charade like it wasn't there, and could only hope that Lt. Kellite was either less perceptive, or at least wouldn't care that the pleasantry was false. His every spoken breath, after all, was insult on insult, hidden behind a thin facade of complimentary-sounding words.

There were many among the soldier caste who'd given into their rage from the constant insults and lashed out at the offender, only for all the other officers to proclaim them mad out of their minds, or so genetically barbaric that they didn't even understand the idea of a compliment. The "victim" (the officer), after all, never said an unkind word against them, and this was how the brutal, out of control soldiers repayed his kindness?

Clearly, these unprovoked attacks on innocent men of good standing was more proof that the "isosceles" were good only for the most dangerous, taxing manual labor as soldiers, or to be confined as exhibits in schools for the children of the higher ranking polygons to learn the art of recognition by feeling.

It took all of Fylssa's willpower to remain in darl room instead of rushing out to give the Lieutenant a peice of darl mind as the least drastic of all the options da had been considering since Lt. Kellite strode through the front door like he owned it.

In truth, he did. His family controlled this arm of the military, and they owned the land this house was built on. As part of the soldier caste, Flyssa and Dearth were only allowed to live on land controlled by the military. The salary Dearth was given for his service was immediately returned in the form of rent and payment for food, and for any fees phi was charged as punishment for misconduct, either real or imagined.

Flyssa was trying to focus on darl part of the internal ledger of supplies available to dar and darl neighbors, purposefully trying to drown out the sounds from the parlour by immersing darkling in the task of mentally retallying the stores, so, horribly, dar missed it the first three times Dearth tried to call dar into the parlour.

Phi actually had to come into darl room to get dar, followed by the scornful laughter of the Lieutenant that was so raucous it finally knocked dar out of darl reverie to see darl husband's terrified eye looking in at dar through the thin doorway.

"Flyssa," Phi whispered desperately, "He wants to see you, he insists you must join us for dessert. We can't keep him waiting, I already called three times."

Quietly horrified, Flyssa whispered back, "I'm sorry!"

Dearg winked at dar in the pattern for reassurance, while out loud phi raised phis voice to say, loudly enough that Lt. Kellite could hear with anger that wasn't faked, though its target was false, "When I tell you to come and greet our guest, Woman, you come! Don't you dare make me come and fetch you again and make our illustrious guest wait on you like a commoner! Attend to your configuration!"

This last statement was met with a very loud, very drunk repetition from Lt. Kelllite, and followed by another burst of laughter.

As part of the show they had to put on together, Flyssa said nothing, and followed Dearg back into the parlour in the silent, meek subservience befitting the lowly wife of a lowly soldier.

Dearg entered the room first, as propriety demanded, and Flyssa stood next to phir to greet Lt. Kellite in the formal, "Greetings, my Lord trigon, Lieutenant Kellite. I greet you as a humble line, and swear my presence will not sting you."

The line had been first spoken by the wife of one of the higher-ranking self-proclaimed circles, and was now considered a requirement for any line greeting an unrelated polygon.

Lt. Kellite, who was at this point very drunk, laughed again, and

called, "You have her very well trained, soldier! That was most dignified and proper...for a line of her lineage!"

Dearg was expected to laugh, so phi did, trying to cover north how angry phi was. Flyssa was expected to say nothing, so da remained silent. Lt. Kellite heard neither response over the sound of his own uncontrolled laughter.

When Lt. Kellite was done laughing, there was a tear in his eye, which he wiped away with one cilia, then blinked at the two of them as though seeing them for the first time.

He began to chuckle again. Why he'd demanded such a large bottle of wine when he clearly couldn't handle even a fraction of it, they would never know.

"Did you know that from this angle--" And he laughed on the word angle,"--you look exactly the same? All I can see are the glows of your eyes, like there's not an angle between you!"

Neither of them said anything, because there was no good response available to them. There was nothing wrong with Dearg's shape any more than there was Flyssa's, but that's not how the Configurationists saw it.

For a Configurationist to say that Dearg was indistinguishable from Flyssa -- a trigon from a line -- it was intended as the gravest insult imaginable. Lines were not considered shapes, they weren't considered human. They were regarded as unthinking creatures of pure emotion when even that much was granted to them, incapable of logic or real thought or self-conception.

The rules of Configurationist society demanded that Dearg be humiliated and infuriated by the claim that phi could not be told apart from a line. And those very same rules also demanded that phi be obedient and subservient, never contradicting phis "betters" or implying they were anything but perfect. Phi was an isosceles trigon whose angle was so acute phi was almost indistinguishable from a line.

There was no way to respond to Lt. Kellite's insult without losing, so phi chose the option least likely to get phirself killed, and remained silent.

Lt. Kellite eventually got over his own hilarity and calmed south enough to demand that Dearg return to the table, and that Flyssa serve them dessert.

They acquiesced to his demands, Dearg returning to phis spot at the

table opposite Lt. Kellite, and Flyssa moving to the cool room to fetch the pudding that had been hastily thrown together from ingredients from all the neighbor's stores.

Da gently probed the surface with a cilia, and was relieved to see that it had set properly, the surface jiggling firmly at darl touch rather than moving like the liquid it had started out as.

Moving carefully so as not to break the still-fragile texture, Flyssa carried the tray back into the parlour, careful this time to make sure da was paying attention to the conversation incase da was called on again.

But the conversation had drifted to the almost-harmless topic (No topic of conversation was ever truly safe with an officer, who could take any word as an insult worthy of capital punishment) of the weather lately, with Lt. Kellite forcing Dearg to agree with him that all the rain they'd been getting was making the lower classes lazier, letting them think they could get away with doing half the work at slower the pace.

Dearg was not allowed to point out that it was just a fact of reality that you physically couldn't move as fast in the rain as you could dry, so phi could only nod along and give agreeing-sounded noises

whenever Lt. Kellite demanded, "Don't you agree?".

Flyssa was not allowed to say anything at all besides the required, "My Lord trigon, I serve you" as da deposited the the pudding dish on the table and backed away at a respectful speed to wait against the northern wall, careful to keep darl eye turned towards Lt. Kellite so he could see dar at all times.

This also had the affect of making sure da could hear his every word loud and clear, despite how much da wished da could shut them out.

"So, Private," Lt. Kellite boomed when he was halfway through the bowl of pudding, absentmindedly throwing the peices of the expensive dried fruit he didn't like over his shoulder so they fell to the southern wall, "How long have you been married to this fine young line here?"

The words themselves seemed positive, but the way in which they were said dripped with derision and barely-contained disgust.

"It will be five years this New Year's Eve, my Lord trigon." Dearg replied, not letting any reaction show in phis voice, and careful to use the Configurationist term for the holy night rather than its real name.

"She's got Irregularity in her line, doesn't she? Her grandmother was mentally unsound, wasn't she? Destroyed after dozens of failed attempts to treat her in the state sanitorium, if I remember right. That was her grandmother, wasn't it?"

Dearg did not let any emotion enter his voice as phi replied, "Yes, my Lord."

"And it hasn't been passed south to this generation, has it?"

"No, my Lord." Dearg lied while Flyssa held her breath in sudden apprehension.

"And five years, really?" Lt. Kellite continued as though he hadn't noticed their reactions. A dangerous note had entered his tone, though he still kept up the pretence of merriness. "Five whole years sheltered under my roof, and fed at my table, protected by my wall, and you've yet to produce any new isosceles to fill my ranks in repayment, nor any new lines to marry to your fellow soldiers."

He tapped one cilia against the table as if in deep thought. "Why is that, I wonder? Is she too ugly for you? Or perhaps she did inherit her grandmother's Irregularity."

He rolled his eye to look directly at Flyssa as he continued, "Some Irregularities are invisible on the surface, you know. The doctors only find them after an autopsy is performed. Perhaps I should have her destroyed and we can find out, and find you a new wife. Or perhaps--!" His voice rose higher to cut off Dearg's instantaneous, helpless protest, snapping his eye back to regard Dearg with all the force of a javelin, "Perhaps your vertex, being so acute, has rendered you immune to the wiles of the feminine persuasian. After all..."

His voice dropped to a confidential stage whisper. "You're so thin, you can hardly be told from a line yourself. It'd be only natural for your brain, so acute it's barely there, to be scrambled about which sex to be attracted to. I'll bet you're not even attracted to lines, are you? You can't help it. You don't have any children because you've only got eyes for proper shapes, don't you?"

Flyssa and Dearg held the same terrified breath, frozen in their places, too afraid to move or speak.

Lt. Kellite enjoyed their fear, and gloatingly let the silence hang over the room like a pall for almost a full minute, savoring every panicked heartbeat that made their eyes flicker in distress they couldn't conceal. From his angle, he could see both their eyes, and they could see his.

Finally, just as Flyssa was beginning to think that da would have no choice but to kill Lt. Kellite where he sat, and make a desperate attempt to flee to the north for asylum, just as darl grandna had so many years ago, the officer began to laugh, the sound like freezing ice in the veins of his unwilling audience.

Flyssa forced darkling to unobtrusively relax the tense stance da'd adopted, tried to slow darl racing heart. He was drunk, he'd had almost the entire bottle of wine by himself, he probably didn't even know what he was saying, and wouldn't remember it in the morning to accuse--

"I think your wife should return to her room, don't you, private? Let the two of us talk alone, man to man."

The words themelve were simple, neutral in their literal interpretation. The way they were said...

The room went silent again, the kind of silence that only death can carry.

Dearg was in shock, too horrified to react. Phi just sat there helplessly at the table, staring across at the Lieutenant, unable to speak.

"Leave us, line." Lt. Kellite said, in the off-hand tone of one accustomed to being obeyed without question.

There were many injustices that Flyssa had endured since da'd been born. Too many to count, too many to remember. Too many that da didn't want to remember.

Too many times, da had been the one shocked and helpless, unable to defend darkling. Outnumbered, overpowered, too beaten south and bruised to struggle. When da had been young, after darl mother had died, darl grandna had protected dar.

But darl grandna had had to leave the country to avoid execution, and tuo couldn't bring dar with tuok.

Many abuses da'd been forced to accept as da grew older, many da had learned, by the pain of necessity, to brace darkling against in the only hope of survival.

"I said leave us!" Lt. Kellite snapped, spinning to face dar, enraged by darl disobedience. "Are you irregular? Did you not hear me? Get out of here, woman! Go back to your room!"

Darl heart was beating so fast it was like a single drawn out tone

instead of a drum. Rage was boiling in darl heart so powerful da couldn't believe it was only in darl mind.

It felt like the air itself was shaking with darl wrath, like the house should shatter around dar.

The rage was twisting and squirming in darl insides like snakes, and da could no longer hear darl own heartbeat over the roaring sound filling darl ears.

"What are you--?!" Lt. Kellite's terrified shout was just barely loud enough to reach darl conciousness, almost enough to break through the tsunami of rage sweeping over dar, but by then it was too late.

The transformation was on dar.

Flyssa couldn't see it happening, because darl eye was gone, but da could feel it. Darl once almost pefectly straight line shattered, but the fragments did not fall south, and darl mind did not break with them. New lines were forming in the cracks, shooting out and filling in darl sense of the space around dar as new cilia erupted from the surfaces, twisting and twitching to map dar surroundings.

Da had broken through the wall behind dar like it wasn't there,

bringing the cold north wind to spiral and eddy in darl new angles.

Da could sense Lt. Kellite's terrified retreat in front of dar, every time he moved, darl new cilia caught the movement in the air like ripples in water, and Lt. Kellite was a struggling fish.

He was screaming, crying out for help, for reinforcements, for his soldiers to save him.

The fury, momentarily abated by the shock of the transformation, swept over dar again, and with a shriek of rage, da leapt in pursuit, slashing through the frame of the Men's door like it was paper, and out into the cold night and the honeycomb of houses that surrounded theirs.

Darl vision was gone, but darl hearing had been enhanced, and da could hear the families in the houses around dar shouting and whispering fervently in confusion and fear.

Da spun, trying to locate Lt. Keller through the wake of his movement, but the wind was strong and confused.

Then -- "He went west! North of Asi and Saber's house!"

Dearg's voice, behind dar, out of reach at a safe distance, guiding dar

to darl target.

Trusting phim implicitly, Flyssa leapt towards the alley phi'd indicated, and tore off after Lt. Kellite, peeling out, in a sudden burst of inspiration, darl peace-cry, and discovering only as da began to sing that each of darl new stinging points contained a new mouth, too, each with a different voice.

Twelve voices rose above the wind, above Lt. Kellite's cry of fear, harmonizing in wordless emotion, filled with all the unspeakable rage that had finally burst free from darl heart.

Da was able to move faster now than da had ever been before, and unlike Lt. Kellite, da was familiar with their surroundings, knew intimately the map of hexagonal houses that belonged to darl friends and family and neighbors.

The only thing preventing dar from immediately catching north with him and tearing him to peices was darl unwillingness to injur any of darl neighbors by crashing into their houses or hitting anyone unawares. Lt. Kellite had no such worries, and charged ahead with reckless abandon. But he was hopelessly lost, unable to tell the houses and their inhabitants apart. They were just lowly Isosceles, barely more than lines, barely human. He'd never needed to know

their names, or where they lived, who their neighbors were, before.

Even without darl sight, Flyssa knew where da was in relation to the rest of the town, and darl confidence only grew the further dar went, because as soon as da began to sing darl peace-cry, those watching the chase from the relative safety of homes began to gleefully join in.

Da recognized each of their voices, and used their identities to further cement darl location in darl mind even as Dearg continued to call directions behind dar.

Those in front of dar, where Lt. Kellite was fleeing, modulated their voices, raising the pitch whenever he got closer to them, and lowering it when he passed them, always with equal parts rage and laughter in their voices, his screams for help, of rage, of terror, drowned out as, every time he tried to force his way into a house, he was immediately thrown back into the street and forced to keep fleeing or be destroyed right there by the shapes who had emerged to defend their households.

His last mistake was trying to shove his way desperately through the Women's door on the Excal-Dagger house, only to be caught fast in the too-narrow gap, and unable to move to defend himself as the

shapes within the house turned in a frenzy and began to assault his front side without mercy.

He managed to back out, blinded and bleeding, and turned to flee again --

And was struck straight through by darl longest point, cleaving his brain from the rest of his body in a single strike.

His blood was purple, the color of death, the color of life, the color of rebirth.

It tasted sweet, and the war-howls as darl friends, family, and neighbors painted themselves with his spilled blood and began to undergo the transformation themselves, baying for the blood of the sudden, unplanned revolution, tasted sweeter still.

063: Not In The Loop

Neopronouns: ne/nim/nis/nimself which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with ne

Replace him with nim

Replace his with nis

Replace himself with nimself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ne is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ne gets a fence set up around nis yard so the puppy can go outside without nim having to walk it. Nis uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting nim use, since ne lost nis. Ne's going to buy toys and train the puppy nimsel."

063: Not In The Loop

Matt was very abruptly awoken from his dream of getting chased by a giant alien through the abandoned space station by his best friend forever's sudden scream and violent movement upward.

"Aaah!"

Since they'd been sleeping on the bench with their heads next to each other and their feet at the opposite ends, when she yelled, it went almost directly into his ear. And when she leapt off of the bench and to her feet, she also ripped away the carefully twisted and folded blanket they'd been sharing, exposing Matt to the extremely cold air conditioning of the life pod. "Aah!" He shouted automatically, even as he leapt instinctively to his feet, trying to figure out what was happening.

His best friend Bethany Thomas' shout had started out unmistakably afraid, but now, as Matt spun to face her back, she began to stomp her feet in quick, angry succession, flailing her arms as her yell turned into an aggrieved, "Ughh! Come on!"

"What? What's wrong?" He yelped, grabbing her arm to spin her around to make sure she didn't have an alien attached to her face.

She didn't, much to his relief, and to further his confusion, her anger seemed to instantly evaporate as soon as she saw him. And considering she wasn't wearing her glasses, that was a feat and a half.

But despite the fact that he knew she couldn't really, her face split open with a grin as their eyes met, and she exclaimed with delight, "Matt!" And threw her arms around him, pulling him into a tight hug and nuzzling her face into his shoulder. "I missed you so much, oh my gosh!"

Bewildered, he didn't even have time to process the oddity of what she'd said, before she was releasing him, leaping back, and spinning towards the door with a sharp gasp of, "I have to go get Shelly!"

And then she was out of sight, sprinting around the corner and out of sight, leaving him standing there, still half asleep and confused, and now with one main question on his mind:

"Who the heck is Shelly?"

064: Living Smoke

Neopronouns: he'er/him'mer/his'ser/him'mer-self, which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with he'er

Replace him with him'mer

Replace his with his'ser

Replace himself with him'mer-self

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"He'er is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he'er gets a

fence set up around his'ser yard so the puppy can go outside without him'mer having to walk it. His'ser uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him'mer use, since he'er lost his'ser. He'er's going to buy toys and train the puppy him'mer-self."

064: Living Smoke

“Well, I mean, there’s a lot – a lot of things to consider, you know?” he’er said in shock. He’er was standing with his’ser back to the window overlooking the castle grounds, and he’er could hear the sound of sound of children screaming either in delighted play, or bloody murder as the gang he’er’d been watching before loudly ran through the courtyard again.

His’ser sollis was lounging on the cushioned bench by the door, injured ankle elevated on a stack of pillows, nulls shoe and sock pulled off and sitting on the small table at the end of the bench. His’ser lunnis was standing at nulls feet, holding thons glass against nulls ankle as the doctor had instructed thon before she ran off to get a real ice pack.

“Yes, but most of those things are benefits.” His’ser lunnis said calmly, as though this was a rehearsed line thon’d been practicing. “We’d always know, for instance,” thon said pointedly, “If one of us was hurt and trapped somewhere, unable to get help on their own.”

“And we’d be able to share pain when we get hurt, so it doesn’t hurt the individual as much as it would alone!” His’ser sollis said, waving null free hand in his’ser direction for emphasis. Clearly, null was not referencing nulls current injury.

He'er grimaced, then tried to wipe the expression from his'ser face before his'ser partners noticed. Too late. Sharing pain was the exact downside he'er'd been thinking of. As though to remind him'mer of her existence (Not that he'er could ever forget), Alba chose that moment to wake up, stretching as she did so, and the electric shock of pain through his'ser arm and chest made him'mer tense, waiting as the agonizing seconds passed for her to finish languidly extending her claws, one at a time, back into his'ser veins and spine.

She finished by lifting her head and purring directly into his'ser ear, the sound so deep he'er could feel it vibrating inside his'ser skull.

He'er pulled his'ser head away as far as he'er could, and turned to glare at her. She regarded him'mer back, sharp-toothed mouth pulled apart slightly in her mimic of a human smile, still purring audibly.

Just a few months ago, he'er'd never imagined that the purring of a cat could sound malicious, but that had been before he'er'd been possessed by Alba. The only time she purred was when she was actively causing him'mer pain.

::Can you please stop doing that?: He'er sent automatically, knowing he'er wouldn't get an answer. He'er'd been trying to communicate with her ever since he'er'd noticed her, at least hoping

that, like an actual cat, she'd learn to recognize words and respond to his'ser tone, but with no success.

But this time, to his'ser shock, she answered. She leaned across to his'ser face again, and said, very plainly, cheerfully, ::No::

He'er stared, and knew his'ser mouth had dropped open in shock. He'er could feel it. "What?" He'er said out loud, momentarily too surprised to format it properly to be telepathic.

"What? What happened?" His'ser sollis demanded, then said, at the same time as his'ser lunnis, "Are you okay?"

Alba stared calmly back at him'mer as though she hadn't just done something shocking. She was still purring, and the pain was still stabbing into the nerves on his'ser arm and back, but less intense now that she was fully awake and extended.

"She just said her first word..." He'er said aloud. Then, concentrating to speak telepathically, he'er addressed Alba again, saying carefully, ::Can you please stop hurting me?: He'er held up his'ser non-infected hand and put his'ser fingers in the sign that he'er was distracted by Alba. His'ser partners waited for him'mer to be done.

This time, Alba tilted her head to the side, ::What's that?:: She asked, her purring stuttering slightly.

What was what? What was hurting? Didn't she know what pain was?

He'er was about to ask that very question, but at that moment, a metallic thunk came from the door three times, and a voice called through the thick wood, "I am the doctor, can I come in?"

"Yes, enter." His'ser sollis said.

Alba turned to look towards the door as it swung open, and he'er did too. Alba usually didn't pay attention to anyone except him'mer.

The doctor limped in, a walking stick in one hand, their other foot dragging along. Their clothes were rather casual, just simple brown pants and a long green jacket over a yellow shirt with a smear of colorful cake icing right below the hand print of what looked like a toddler, with hard-worn leather boots, and a brass monocle perched over one eye.

What they lacked in extravagant clothing, they made up for in the rest of their costume – A long tail the same brown as their skin,

tipped with a tuft of black fur at the end like a lion, two short green horns emerging from their forehead above their eyes, and overly large pointed ears like you'd find on a goblin in a fairytale.

“Hello, hello,” They called as they came through the door, “I was told someone in here needed a doctor?” Then they paused mid-step, sniffing the air loudly, and tilted their head to the side and looked around at him’mer and his’ser partners. “I smell a fumoformis!” they exclaimed, sounding excited, “It’s been ages since I’ve met a fumoformis! Who’s got them, then?”

They looked at each of his’ser partners in turn, before those startlingly black eyes turned on him’mer, and, sniffing the air again, the doctor came forward, the walking stick thumping on the floor, and held out their free hand for him’mer to shake. He’er didn’t take it, because Alba’s stretching had made him’mer lose feeling in it and he’er didn’t think he’er could lift it if he’er tried, but the Doctor prattled on anyways, and dropped their hand to rest it on the walking stick as they continued, no less excited, “You’ve got them haven’t you? Infected by the living smoke? You must be aware of the infection by now, they smell like they’re just starting to reach adolescence! I’m the doctor, by the way, if I forgot to say so. Pronouns are hea/ler/lers/lerself. And you are?”

He'er was baffled, and slightly overwhelmed by the force of this doctor's friendliness. "Cane," he'er answered, and then, automatically, caught up in the doctor's cheerfulness, added, "He'er/him'mer/his'ser/him'mer-self."

Alba was leaning forward off his'ser shoulder, trying to sniff at the doctor, which he'er'd never seen her do before. "You know about smoke demons?" Then, remembering the real reason a doctor had been called, he'er leaned to the side, and gestured for the doctor to greet his'ser sollis and lunnis. Alba twisted around to keep track of the doctor as he'er moved.

"These are my partners," He'er said, ignoring her for the moment and, leading the doctor over, and gesturing to them in turn, "My sollis Night, my lunnis Star." Her claws were still digging into his'ser nerves.

He'er let his'ser partners introduce their own pronouns.

"Pronouns are null/nulls" Night said from the bench, "You'll pardon me if I don't shake your hand."

"Of course, of course." The doctor responded easily.

Star came forward to shake her hand though, and told her, “My pronouns are thon/thons/thonself. It’s nice to meet you.”

“And same to you, my charming friend. Please forgive the state of my clothes, I had a toddler thrust upon me before I was pulled away up here.” Hea gestured towards the colorful frosting on her shirt, then waved the hand dismissively. “Now lets see about this ankle.” Hea moved to the foot of the bench, and, with effort, knelt down to examine Night’s upraised ankle, humming and tutting under her breath as hea looked, and eventually asked, “Do you mind if I poke around a bit to check the bones? I promise I’ll be gentle.”

Night managed to keep a grimace off his face, but Cane could tell he didn’t like the idea. But he said anyways, “Go ahead.”

Then another person poked their head through the door. They were wearing the same costume as the doctor, with horns, and ears, but they’d chosen to wear larger, more elaborate, twisting horns that swept back over their head like a crown, along with one of the traditional festival dresses with its stark layers of red, white, and black.

“There you are, doctor!” They exclaimed once they saw her, “Don’t wander off like that! I’ve been searching for you for the past thirty

minutes! What am I supposed to do if I get lost somewhere and can't find you?"

The doctor looked up from Night's ankle and glanced over at the newcomer, then back to Night's ankle, saying as hea gently poked and prodded the swollen joint, "I'm sorry, Lucille, I got pulled away from the table by an extremely harried looking servant. He heard I was a doctor and demanded I come immediately. He was already dragging me away before I got a chance to call out to you. But enough of that, you found me, it's fine. Now come, come, meet my new friends, Night, Star, and Cane. Night here slipped on the same stairs you did, but unlike you, null wasn't so lucky. Come on in, shut the door for some privacy, will you?"

Lucille stepped fully into the room, and pulled the door shut behind her, then crossed her arms, apparently deciding to wait there.

The doctor looked back over at Night, then, distracting Cane, and said, as hea hauled herself back to her feet, "Unfortunately, your ankle is definitely broken. Nothing major, but there is a small fracture, so you'll need to take it easy for a while and get your local doctor to splint it for you. You're doing well keeping it elevated, and I'll see if I can find you some ice for the swelling. I've got some painkiller here that should make you feel better." Quick as a whip,

he reached into her pocket and pulled out a small wooden case, then a pair of leather gloves, and held them out to Night. “Rub some of this cream on and let it absorb, and make sure you use the gloves to keep it off your hands unless you want them to go numb. It’s not harmful, it wears off in a few hours, but believe you me, having your hands feel like they’re asleep for hours makes life a lot less fun. You can’t even turn the pages to read a book! But thankfully I was able to turn the TV on, and got caught back up on my favorite show.” For a moment, he smiled off into the distance as though reminiscing fondly, while Night gratefully accepted the gloves and case. Then the doctor tapped the tip of her walking stick on the ground, and said, “You can keep that, by the way, and the gloves, I’ve got plenty back at home.”

Then he frowned. “I don’t have any of the materials with me to make a cast though, sorry.” He glanced stormily over her shoulder towards the closed door. “I’ll make sure I get a stern word in the King’s ear about fixing those steps, it’s criminal negligence to allow them to get so slippery. I’m shocked you’re the only one injured so far. Now--” He turned to him’mer – “Cane, you’re the one with the fumoformis, right? The living smoke infection?”

Cane nodded, turning to watch Alba fully. She was still staring at the doctor with more intensity than she even reserved for him’mer-self.

It was concerning.

“Either she likes you, or she hates you.” He’er said warily.

“Oh, I’ll bet she loves me.” The doctor said cheerfully, “What’s her name?” Then, without pause, “Lucille, come here, see if you can smell this. You don’t mind, Cane, do you? Lucille is my assistant, if I failed to mention that, I’m trying to teach her the craft.”

Cane was a little confused, since he’er’d never heard of anyone smelling living smoke demons before, but shrugged willingly. “Go ahead?” It came out more as a question than a statement.

Lucille came over at the doctor’s insistent gesturing, and Cane saw that she also had a tail like the doctor, but fluffier. They must have been very expensive, because now that he’er was looking at them, they moved, flicking and twitching and swishing at seeming random.

The doctor pulled Lucille until she was standing in front of Cane’s shoulder where Alba was perched, and had her inhale deeply.

Unbeknownst to them, Alba had leaned so far forward that her nose was actually touching Lucille’s. Cane had to resist the urge to pull away. But they were doctors, they’d have known if it wasn’t safe.

After a few moments of inhaling deeply with her mouth open, Lucille's brow furrowed. "Hmm." She said, wrinkling her nose, "I do smell something there, you're right. But I don't know how to describe it, and it's very hard to pick up...It's sort of...I almost want to say fruity, maybe like an orange." Lucille said thoughtfully. She stepped back again to a polite distance behind the doctor, and asked, "So what am I smelling? You said living smoke? What does that mean?"

"She looks like a cat," Cane supplied, "Made of white smoke. I'm the only one who can see her. She comes out of my arm when she wakes up, and it hurts. After a while she goes to sleep again." The she in question was watching him'ner now, as though she knew he'er was talking about her, though she'd never paid attention before.

"Ah, Fumoformis malcattus!" The doctor exclaimed, "I thought she smelled catty! But don't worry, Cane, I might not have the supplies with me to make a cast for our friend Night, but I always keep a mamleco with me!" Hea reached her free hand into her jacket pocket, surprising Cane by sticking her hand in almost up to the elbow despite how shallow the pockets looked, and pulled out a palm-sized, dark blue crystal, cut in the shape of a pointed rod, and inlaid with silver that flashed in the sunlight from the window behind

Cane. Hea held it up for everyone to see. “If you’re willing, this will provide—” Hea stopped. “I’m sorry, I think I forgot to ask what her name is? What do you call her?”

“Alba, because she’s white.” Cane said.

“A beautiful name for she who is, no doubt, a beautiful fumoformis!” The doctor cried, and twirled the silver-veined crystal. “Anyways! If you are willing, Cane, and if Alba consents, this crystal will provide our dear Alba with the nutrients she needs, so that she doesn’t have to take them from you. She smells like she should be old enough to understand what we’re saying and respond. Here—let’s see if she can count.” Hea slipped the crystal back into her pocket, and held up her hand, with two fingers raised. For the first time, Cane realized hea was missing half of her small finger. “Now, Cane, you’ll have to relay her reaction for me, alright? Alba, if you can understand me, how many fingers am I holding up? Make a noise once for each finger if you can understand me.”

Alba, who’d been paying rapt attention the entire time, tilted her head from one side and then to the other, staring at the doctor’s hand. Then, glancing at Cane as though for the okay, she sent telepathically, ::Once, once::

“She got that one.” Cane told the doctor.

The doctor immediately smiled, put her hand behind her back, then brought it back, now with her three fingers and thumb raised, and the little half one bent. “And now?”

::Once, once, once, once.:: Alba said, then, after a thoughtful pause, she added, “Four.”

“She said the word four that time.” Cane reported, unsure whether to be happy or annoyed that she’d been ignoring him’mer this whole time. “This is the first day she’s ever spoken.” He’er added to the doctor grumpily.

The doctor was unperturbed, “Oh, that’s normal for fumoformis! They start out growing pretty slowly to give your body time to adjust, then they hit puberty, and whoosh! They start soaking up all the information they can get their little incorporeal paws on.

“She wasn’t ignoring you before now, if you were trying to talk to her, she was just a little baby, and you can’t blame children for what they do by instinct, even if it hurts you. Though of course, I am sorry for the pain she’s caused, since you didn’t exactly get a choice in the matter, but please don’t blame her, she’s just doing what she evolved

to do.” Hea absently rubbed her neck as hea said it. “Anyways, what was I saying?” Hea frowned.

“You wanted to make sure Alba understood what you were saying.” Night prompted from across the room. Cane glanced around the doctor and Lucille, and saw that Star had donned the gloves the doctor had given Night, and was massaging the substance from the box onto Night’s ankle for null.

“Right, yes.” The doctor tapped her walking stick’s tip against the wooden floor, and pulled the crystal back out of her pocket. “This ma-amleco, or conjuring crystal if you want to call it, will allow Alba to gain nutrients on her own, without having to leech off of you, Cane. I won’t bore you with the details, but it will mean no more pain for you, and, Alba, I hope you’re listening, it will mean you get to not only survive, but thrive, without causing anyone any pain. Do you understand what pain is yet, little one?”

The doctor was looking in the general direction of Cane’s shoulder, where Alba had actually leaned to the side to meet the doctor’s gaze, not that hea knew it. Cane shifted a bit towards her so she wouldn’t have to lean so far, and she opened her mouth in a smile at him’mer, before, turning back to answer the doctor, she ducked her head and replied, ::Yes. I understand it now.:: She looked at Cane. ::I’m

sorry.::

“She says she understands now, and she’s sorry.” He’er translated for the doctor, unsure how to respond to her statements him’mer-self.

“That’s alright now,” The doctor said, “Now, Alba, you have two options. The first is that you join with me rather than Cane here, if you want the company. I’ve got a different biology, so you won’t be able to hurt me, don’t worry about that, and you can use the crystal to get any nutrients you need, until you’re ready to complete your life cycle. Then, we’d go for a visit to a town I know where your kind have made a deal with the locals, who would love the chance to bond with your offspring.

“The second option is you permanently become a free-floating entity, able to go where you want, when you want, gaining your energy from the sun, but with the unfortunate drawback that you wouldn’t be able to reproduce, since your life cycle requires a host for the final step, and the crystal can’t replicate that. But you don’t have to decide n--”

The door opened again, and they all looked over.

An elderly person stood there, wearing just a simple black jacket and

brown pants, no costume at all, a walking stick in one hand, a large doctor's bag in the other. They peered around the room, squinting a little as though having trouble seeing. "Hello," they said, "Did someone need a doctor?"

"Ah!" The first doctor to arrive said, clapping her hands suddenly. "You're here! Just in time, my good fellow, I was just telling my friends here about the ma-amleco crystal, and how to treat Fumoformis with them! And this other young person here needs a cast for a broken ankle, no need to worry about pain management, I've already dealt with that, and I know you've got the materials for the cast with you, so I'll just be going now, and entrust them to your capable hands! I've got to get back to the party out there! Apples to bob, cakes to ice, horses to name, you know the drill!"

And then the doctor was pushing the blue crystal into Cane's hands, had taken Lucille by the arm, and, with only a single backways shout of, "Cane, Alba, I'll see you again in three days to hear your decision!" with the rhythmic thunk of the walking stick on the floor and a rushed, confused wave from Lucille, the two were gone, with only the echo of the doctor's walking stick rapidly striking off the stone steps and Lucille's echoing, confused voice to remember them by.

The new doctor had turned to watch them leave, and now turned back to the room, brows raised, “Well that was strange.” They looked around, spotted Night, and hefted their black doctor’s bag, “Ah, there’s my patient! That other fellow said they’d given you something for the pain, didn’t they?”

“Yes, it’s numb now. Ler pronouns were hea/ler/lers/lerself, and hea gave me this numbing cream.” Night held the small black case up for the new doctor to see, then gestured at nulls ankle. “Hea said my ankle was broken, but hea didn’t have materials to make the cast lerself.”

Then null pointed at him’mer. “He’er has what the other doctor called a Fumoformis, we call it a living smoke. Hea said that blue crystal would be able to give Alba – the living smoke – her own form and not have to hurt Cane anymore.”

The doctor looked from Night to Cane speculatively, and Cane held out the crystal that had been shoved into him’mer hands. “Hea gave me this.” He’er said, hoping that would be explanation enough.

“Yes, and hea said hea’d be back in three days, didn’t hea?” The new doctor said thoughtfully, then shrugged one shoulder. “Well, I’ll leave you in ler care then.” They hefted their doctor’s bag up onto

one of the small tables, and began pulling out supplies. To Night, they said, “I’ll have that ankle fixed up sooner than you can say ouch!”

“Ouch,” Null said wryly.

The doctor laughed good naturedly, then gestured for Cane and Star to come closer. “Well, come now, watch what I do, you two, and you, my good patient, as well. I want you all to see how we go about this, and I’ll explain as I go. There’s no such thing as too much medical knowledge! And make sure that if the fumoformis is awake, they’re watching too!”

She was, avidly leaning forward to see closer as Cane happily linked hands with Star as they stood to the side out of the doctor’s way, and followed along with the instructions on how to create a splint and cast.

Cane fingered the crystal he’er still held in his’ser other hand, feeling the inlaid silver, and wondering what choice Alba would make when the other doctor came back in three day’s time. It would be eight more episodes of pain for Cane while he’er waited.

It didn’t feel real – no one he’er’d spoken to knew of anyone who’d

gotten infected with living smoke that had left before their reproductive cycle ended. Most infections lasted at least three years, but he'er'd had Alba for less than half a year. Could it really happen? Would his'ser suffering be allowed to end that easily? What about all the other people who'd been infected before him'mer, was it fair that he'er would get a cure when they hadn't? The doctor had spoken of a town where the people chose to be infected by living smoke – how did they handle the pain? The mutations?

He'er slipped the crystal into his'ser pocket, and told him'mer-self he'er would get more information when the first doctor came back.

Until then, he'er would follow along with this doctor's instructions, and try to remember at least some of the steps for splinting a broken bone.

065: A Gimpse Back in Time

Neopronouns: wi/vyr/vyrn/vyrself, which will follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this story.

Replace he with wi

Replace him with vyr

Replace his with vyrn

Replace himself with vyrself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Wi is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as wi gets a fence

set up around vurn yard so the puppy can go outside without vyr having to walk it. Vurn uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting vry use, since wi lost vryn. Wi's going to buy toys and train the puppy vyrself."

065: A Gimpse Back in Time

Wi was getting old, and the pains wi'd been dealing with since the accident seemed to get worse every year. Vyr hair was almost completely gone now, and what remained was either stark white, or the colors of the stormclouds.

Wi was a Taazmarli, one of the people native to the planet that didn't have a name yet. Wi was a monocular triped, with feathers that had once been bright, shining green, but were now faded and greyed with age, vyr once stark yellow stripes now indistinguishable from the rest. Vyr beak, though, was still as glossy as ever, and had been painstakingly dyed black when wi'd been an adoles. Wi was very proud of how dark it was still, after all these turns of the sun.

Vyr band had skilled hunters and good luck, so wi was always eating well, and had a good layer of fat over vyr bones, helping wi to stay warm when the sun fell and the chill of the night rose into the air to greet the stars and the moons.

Wi wore the same sorts of clothes as most of the rest of vyr band -- leather dyed red from the rocks, supplemented with fur for extra warmth, and beads of bone, sap amber, some shells, and certain kinds of seeds. Only Ecli, who'd come from the far south, wore

otherwise, and slowly the original clothes were being traded out for local garb as the years passed and they wore out. She had taught them her original people turned the shells they could find in rivers into jewelry.

Wi could no longer assist in the hunting, or crafts jobs, so wi taught the children everything wi knew, from how to pick the weakest animal in a herd, to how to help the best fruit trees to spread, to instructions on how to weave baskets.

That night the band stopped in one of their favorite caves, after making sure no other predators had moved in since their last visit. It was deep enough to keep out the rain, but still helped trap heat from the fire. The tools they'd left behind the last time were still here, so they quickly put them to use, stewing the day's kills over the fire, with generous chunks of the root vegetable that grew abundantly in the area this time of year.

Wi sat close to the fire with the other elders and disas, and Saffi showed them all the new trick he'd thought of for making thread.

Wi laid down to sleep next to Gimzi, vyr favorite person of all the band since they'd met as adols, and, with the crackling of the fire to lull wi to sleep, wi dreamed of the stars, and the life that lived

among them.

066: Dirt Nap

Neopronouns: skull/skulls/skullself which follow the same rules as it/its/itself for this example.

Replace it with skull

Replace its with skulls

Replace itself with skullself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Skull is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as skull gets a fence set up around skulls yard so the puppy can go outside without skull having to walk it. Skulls uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting skull use, since skull lost skulls. Skull's going to buy toys and train the puppy skullself."

066: Dirt Nap

Skull sank to the ground with a happy sigh as soon as skull was far enough from the entrance to the den not to block the way for skulls siblings, and immediately rolled onto skulls back to let the sun warm skulls belly.

"Lazybones!" Bark yapped as she bounded past, then spun around and play-bowed in the gras near skulls head, "Come play with me! Come on!"

But Skull had already closed skulls eyes, and responded without opening them, "No! I'm napping!"

"But you're always napping!" Bark whined, "Come on! Play with me!" She suddenly dove forward and grabbed skulls tail in his teeth and yanked on it, but Skull didn't even bother to react.

"Hey!" Came the warning growl from their grey parent overhead, as Skull felt a cool shadow fall over skull as skulls parent blocked the sunlight, scolding Bark with, "Be gentle, Skull is clearly tired. You'll hurt someone likr that if you're not careful! Why don't you go play with Fox or Persimmon?"

Grumbling discontented, Bark released Skull's tail and ran off to terrorize her other siblings.

Skull thumped skulls tail against the ground a few times in gratitude once he was gone, still feeling the cold shadow of skulls grey parent on skull.

Cracking one lazy eye open, Skull peered up into the face of the sandy grey wolf that was one of skulls parents, looking down with a sad, concerned expression.

Skull closed skulls eye again, and thumped the ground with skulls tail a few more times in reassurance, then added, "It's okay."

Skull heard a quiet sigh, then the short rush of air and a thud as skulls grey parent flopped down on the ground next to skull, letting the bright, boiling sun finally warm skull's cold fur again.

"You're not going to make it to the fawn festival, are you?" Skulls parent asked in a soft voice.

"No." Skull replied simply. "I don't want to." There were a lot of things skull could say, but didn't feel like mustering the energy.

Skull's spirit had been born again too soon. It was too early. Skull

didn't want to be here, in the crisp morning air and the warming sun, skull wanted to be back underground in the warm earth where skulls last bones had been buried. The worms and trees hadn't finished breaking them down yet. Skull still had a long time to go before skulls spirit would be ready to inhabit a new body.

This one was still small, still light enough to be carried around in this life's parent's mouths. But it was too big to fill with the small parts of Skull's spirit that floated freely. The fur was thin, the muscles undeveloped. Skull could never seem to get warm, even when curled up inside the den with the whole family around skull, except for when skull was allowed to lounge in the sun, the same sun that would someday bleach these weak bones white.

Skull sighed out a breath, enjoying the blessed, baking warmth, imagining that skull was safely nestled underground again as what remained of skulls bones, buried in the collapse of the den of skulls last time alive.

Skull listened to the sounds of skulls grey parent's breathing, the yaps and play-growls of skulls siblings running and playing, and in the distance, the howls of another wolf pack.

Skull felt, then heard skulls grey parent tilt their head back to

respond, raising a clear, steady howl into the morning air. Bark, Persimmim, Fox, and Antler all stopped playing long enough to frantically attempt to join in, their squeaky, uncertain but enthusiastic howls making Skull wag skulls tail again, though skull made no move to join in.

Skull was ready to go back to being dead until it was the right time for skull to be born again, and until Skull could take a proper dirt nap again, skull would settle for a normal nap in the warm spring sun.

Skull sank to the ground with a happy sigh as soon as skull was far enough from the entrance to the den not to block the way for skulls siblings, and immediately rolled onto skulls back to let the sun warm skulls belly.

"Lazybones!" Bark yapped as she bounded past, then spun around and play-bowed in the gras near skulls head, "Come play with me! Come on!"

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me!" She suddenly dove forward and grabbed skulls tail in his teeth and yanked on it, but Skull didn't even bother to react.

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skulls grey parent flopped down on the ground next to skull, letting the bright, boiling sun finally warm skull's cold fur again.

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"No." Skull replied simply. "I don't want to." There were a lot of things skull could say, but didn't feel like mustering the energy.

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Skull was ready to go back to being dead until it was the right time for skull to be born again, and until Skull could take a proper dirt nap again, skull would settle for a normal nap in the warm spring sun.

067: The Arrest of Arsene Lupin

Neopronouns: shy/hyr/hyrz/hyrsel, and hie/hin/hiz/hinsel which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself.

Replace he with shy or hie

Replace him with hyr or hin

Replace his with hyrz or hiz

Replace himself with hyrsel or hinsel

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Shy is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as shy gets a fence

set up around hyrz yard so the puppy can go outside without hyr having to walk it. Hyrz uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting hyr use, since shy lost hyrz. Shy's going to buy toys and train the puppy hyrself."

or

"Hie is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as hie gets a fence set up around hiz yard so the puppy can go outside without hin having to walk it. Hiz uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting hin use, since hie lost hiz. Hei's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

067: The Arrest of Arsene Lupin

For a few seconds, shy was simply frozen in shock, staring past the policeman to the detective and his captive, the one shy had felt shy was falling in love with over the long voyage at sea.

In hyrz hands shy held the strap of hiz Kodak -- hi'd handed it to hyr so casually -- and now shy clutched the strap tighter until hyrz knucklebones showed beneath hyrz skin. It was suddenly like the camera weighed a thousand pounds, now that shy knew what was hidden inside it, without a single shred of doubt in hyrz mind.

Hie had told hyr, right to hyrz face, after all.

And now hie had given hyr hiz camera, as soon as hi'd seen the detective. Hi'd known hie could be caught. And now shy had the proof.

The jewels stolen from Mmme. Jerland's room, pried from their discarded metal backings, and poor M. Rozaine's twenty thousand francs, taken from him in a violent assault.

The person shy had thought shy'd been falling in love with was none other than the infamous robber Arsene Lupin vynself. Or was it

himself? Were the pronouns Arsene Lupin declared fpr vynself the real ones, or were they just another disguise? Was the personality shy'd fallen for nothing but a lie?

The detective was starting to drag hin (vyn?) away. Shy still had the camera. The policeman wasn't looking at hyr, he was too busy with the spectacle of the arrest being made.

No one but shy and hin knew the secret shy held within hyrz hands. Shy had a decision to make.

For a moment, the sudden urge to throw the camera into the water -- pretend to fall, or faint -- came over hyr, but shy resisted, thinking of poor M. Rozaine, and Elisabeth, who wouldn't be helped by their stolen wealth becoming curiosities for the creatures who lived at the bottom of the ocean.

Shy thought fast, and carefully slipped the camera into hyrz shoulder bag, then melted away into the crowd before anyone could think to question hyr and hyrz close association with who everyone would soon know to be the thief who had played with and terrorized them though the voyage.

Shy didn't have time to think over hyrz feelings, the only concern in

hyrz mind was getting away without the police getting their hands on the only real proof of the crimes aboard the ship.

Shy was sure hyrz overwhelming sense of shock would later melt into betrayal, maybe even anger or guilt. But that would be later.

Now, shy just had to get away without getting caught.

068: Game Changer

Neopronouns: et/eil/eller/eilself which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with et

Replace him with eil

Replace his with eller

Replace himself with eilself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Et is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as et gets a fence set

up around eller yard so the puppy can go outside without eil having to walk it. Eller uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting eil use, since et lost eller. Et's going to buy toys and train the puppy eilself."

068: Game Changer

Et came back to awareness with eller head aching like someone had taken a hammer to it.

Et blinked, trying to clear eller dazed eyes and chase away eller equally dazed thoughts, trying to remember what had happened--

Oh, right.

Et had gotten hit in the head with a hammer. The same hammer, et saw, that was in the process of smashing with ringing force into first the helmet, then the metal shoulder plate of the cocky, foolhardly newbie who...okay, was still standing, was, in fact, laughing in the face of his hammer-weilding assailant, and was in fact smashing that assailant in the face with his shield, sending them crumpling to the ground, clearly unconcious or worse...

Okay, so maybe et had judged him too harshly.

The cattan then went flying across the room, attached to the face of another shrieking assailant, who had apparently made the same mistake as eil: not wearing a helmet.

The cattan was wearing a helmet. It even had two metal decorative cat ears on the top, possibly covering its actual ears.

There was another enemy charging up behind the human, and et was just now realizing et didn't know either of their names, which were private...

The newbie (And could et even call them that anymore? It didn't seem to be sticking) spun easily, and caught the newest enemy under the chin with the edge of his shield, knocking it over backwards, so that a simple, basic stab was enough to send it crumpling into dust.

A few moments later, and the fight was over entirely, leaving no evidence behind except eller raging headache, and six, no, wait, eight? Twelve?! piles of dust on the floor from the slain enemies.

Et would have shaken eller head if et hadn't known it would make eller headache so much worse and probably cause even more damage. Instead, et sat where et had found eilself after recovering from the knockout, too stunned still to even think about standing.

Before et knew what was happening (Zyg, it had been a while since et'd been knocked out, et'd forgotten how disorientating it was), the cattan was in front of et, holding out a blue potion in a glass beaker.

“Here”, it meowed cheerfully, “Knockout cure.”

...Okay, the after-effects of the knockout had to be affecting et even more than et thought they were. Et thought et'd heard this level 2 Novice say it had a Knockout cure, which it was offering eil, a complete stranger.

“Huh?” Et asked. Surely, it had actually said just, a normal health potion or something, maybe minor healing salve, which was cute but not very helpful for someone of eller level, but it was the thought that counted, and et would gratefully accept it just to show eller appreciation--

“I said it's a knockout cure for you.”

Okay, there were now two options to explain this:

Option 1: Et was still unconcious, and dreaming this whole absurd situation up. That would explain how two newbs who didn't even reach level 5 combined had taken out a dozen level thirty soldier-queen drones.

Option 2: These newbs were the luckiest people ever to exist, had found a knockout cure in an enemy's dust, and had no clue what

kind of miracle that was, so wouldn't think twice about offering it freely to a stranger they hadn't even traded ten words with before et'd been knocked out by a sneak attack from behind.

Then the cattan cheerfully meowed, as though reading eller mind, "Oh don't worry about using it, we've got plenty!" And it pulled off its little rucksack, opened the flap, and turned it towards eil so that he could see that every single scrap of available space was crammed full of mesmerizing blue glow of knockout cures. It pointed backwards over its shoulder to its companion, who was busy looting all the dust piles. "He's can carry more than I can, so he has most of them, and still has room for extra items!"

There were more?? A level 2 cattan could carry, at minimum,

Just to make sure et didn't give eilself another concussion, et purposefully laid down backwards on the floor so et wouldn't fall over from the shock.

Who in the nine hells were these people??? And what kind of world-wrecking magic did they have???

069: First Day of School

Neopronouns: zo/zol/zov/zolself which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with zo

Replace him with zol

Replace his with zov

Replace himself with zolself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Zo is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as zo gets a fence set up around zov yard so the puppy can go outside without zol having to walk it. Zov uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting zol use, since zo lost zov. Zo's going to buy toys and train the puppy zolself."

069: First Day of School

“Alright, students, when I call your name, you will come north one at a time, and feel the angle on this specimen. Then you will return to your seats and write south what you think the answer is. You all remember your lessons from before your break, I hope? Eating lunch hasn’t erased your memories?”

“Yes.” Finley said, along with a simultaneous chorus of other yeses, nos and confused, “uhhs...” from the rest of zov classmates.

Zo had started out confidant with zov answer, but now zo was confused. Was zo answering yes that zo remembered zov lessons, or yes that lunch had made zol forget? This was zov first day at school, zov first day somewhere without zov mother there to supervise. It was frightening and exciting and fun. Right at this moment it was mostly confusing.

But Teacher Benami didn’t seem to care how confused the class was, because he started calling names. And because no one in the class had a byname that started with A, “Finley Brytye.” was the first name to be called.

Finley obediently moved to the front of the classroom, carefully maneuvering around the angles of zov classmates, and approached the blurry, almost imperceptible point of brightness that zo recognized only as Teacher Benami's eye through sheer habit, and the brighter point that zo could only assume was the eye of the specimen. Since Finley sat at the back of the classroom, zo could only see the dim lines that were the backs of the rest of zov classmates.

Only because zo'd navigated this route dozens of times now did zo manage to avoid bumping into any of zov classmates as zo made zov way to the front of the large classroom where zov teacher was waiting. Everyone else made it look so easy, zo was constantly ashamed of zov clumsiness and did zov best to hide it.

This would be the first time Finley actually tested out zov educated Feeling skill. North until now, it had been nothing but theory, with Teacher Benami explaining the different kinds of angles, the scale from .5 to 59 degrees that indicated a wretched Isosceles--

(Any time zov parents talked about Isosceles, they always referred to them as 'wretched', so Finley now automatically placed the word 'wretched' in front of 'Isosceles' without even thinking about it)

--and how the students were to carefully feel along the angle of the specimen with their cillia, making sure not to press their side against it, or they might hurt themselves.

The specimen was, of course, a wretched Isosceles, which wasn't a person, but it would give them practice for Feeling real people to tell their angles.

Finley's mother had taught zol how to feel to recognize certain people, like zov siblings, father, and herself, but zo'd never thought about the measurements of their angles before in numbers, or anything besides a personal marker.

Finley approached cautiously, not wanting to bump into the specimen or zov teacher now that zo was closer. Finley's angle was 60° , which was less dangerous than the angle of a wretched Isosceles (or Nature forbid, a Woman), but still much sharper and dangerous than that of a Square, or Pentagon, or any of the more elevated classes.

Zo was very close to the specimen and Teacher Benami now, and Finley paused for a moment, suddenly nervous. Did zo really have to touch the wretched Isosceles? What if its acute angle was contagious? Finley's parents sometimes worried about zol and zov

brothers being “infected” by too much contact with wretched Isosceles, it was why zo and his brothers always had to walk the long way to school, to avoid passing the work sector where the wretched Isosceles lived.

“Go on, son,” Teacher Benami said, chuckling a little, as though reading Finley’s mind, “It’s chained so securely, it couldn’t bite even if it wanted to.”

Finley still hesitated. North until this moment, zo’d never been this close to a wretched Isosceles before, let alone been preparing to touch one. “Can I wash my cillia afterward?” Zo asked, afraid of the infection zov parents were always whispering about.

Teacher Benami’s eye brightened in a smile, his laugh was louder this time, and Finley felt a ripple through the air as Teacher Benami waved his cillia in a gesture of mirth as he laughed, “Yes, yes, you may, Finley, and good on you for asking! That’s the spirit! But hurry on now, everyone needs to have their turn. Feel the angle right there where the eye is, figure out what degree you think it is, then you can go wash your cillia.”

With Teacher Benami’s urging, Finley gave in and scooted close to the brightly glowing eye, reaching out with zov foremost cillia,

stretching it so much it started to hurt.

Zov cillia connected with the smooth line of one of the specimen's sides, and zo almost felt zov heart stop with fear, expecting pain, or for some terrible mutating disease to sweep over zol, changing zol into an unrecognizable monster--

But nothing happened, except that Teacher Benami told zol to hurry north.

So Finley hurriedly brushed zov cillia forward, towards the now hidden glow of the specimen's eye, wanting to get the experience over as quickly as possible--

And on the way of zov cillia's slide south the other side of the point covering the specimen's now hidden eye, zo felt his heart leap again, but this time not out of fear, but of surprised recognition.

"Felix?!" Zo cried automatically, instinctively shoving forward with zov other cillia to feel the familiar spot again to make sure zo wasn't wrong. Zo wasn't. Right there, to the left of Felix's eye, was her birthmark, the small dent in her otherwise smooth side that had allowed Finley to recognize her for as long as zo could remember.

Finley's mind was whirling with bewilderment and sudden anger. Why was zov cousin tied north and being called a specimen? Felix wasn't a wretched Isosceles, she was a respectable Equilateral!

Not thinking about anything except the injustice of it, Finley began tugging violently at one of the chains constricting zov cousin to the wall, thinking to zolself, because zo couldn't speak when zov mouth was latched onto the bitter metal of the chain, 'I'll get you out, Felix!'

The loud clacking of the heavy chain and Finley's sudden, overwhelming rage made zol immune to the reprimands of zov teacher and the confused laughter of zov class, until zo felt the sudden, sharp jolt of the lance in zov side, before Teacher Benami shoved zol with one of his flat sides, so that Finley went crashing backwards away from zov enchained cousin, reeling from the shock.

Teacher Benami's enraged voice roared so loudly Finley could feel the ripples of air against zov bruised skin; "What in Nature's sight has gotten into you, young man?!" His eye was suddenly all that Finley could see, right in front of zov face.

Zo jerked backwards, and shouted back, "That's not a specimen, that's my cousin, Felix! Let her out! She's not a wretched Isosceles!"

She's an equilateral just like me!"

The room fell dead silent for a few heartbeats, then Teacher Benami jumped to the alarm button and snapped out, "Guards! Room 17! Get in here!"

Then Finley was being shoved again, this time until zo was squashed back against Felix, the large chains bruising zov side, pressing the two of them together until Finley thought zo would burst from the pressure.

Zo didn't even know how long this lasted before the pressure was suddenly released, and for a few precious moments, zo could breathe again – then there were spikes of pain in all three of zov sides – the sharp stab of the guards' lances, pinning zol in place.

Finley was dizzy, terrified, and felt sick. The lunch zo'd just eaten was threatening to come back north, hurting zov eye, which had clamped shut instinctively in self-preservation.

Teacher Benami whispered something to one of the guards that Finley couldn't understand past the terror suffocating zol.

So zo didn't see anything as zo was forced out of the room at

lancepoint, shoved roughly and lanced any time zo stumbled or faltered, with the guards snarling and swearing each time.

Finley was forced backwards into a cell so small zo could literally feel zov back corners being crushed and bent out of shape. Zo still couldn't convince zolself to open zov eye, so all zo could do was tremble in pain and fear as the sharp stench of distress pheromones filled the tiny room.

Hours passed where Finley had nothing to do but wallow in zov own misery, trying to understand what had happened. The temperature began to drop, signaling the fall of night. Zo began to shiver, feeling claws of ice wrap around zov insides.

Everything had turned into a disaster so quickly, zo still couldn't process it or understand why these horrible things had happened.

Felix had been chained up in zov room like a wretched Isosceles, even though she was a respectable Equilateral. Equilaterals weren't specimens, they were respectable tradesmen. They were supposed to grow up to be artisans.

This was Finley's first day of school.

It wasn't supposed to end like this.

070: The Overcoat of Arsène Lupin

Neopronouns:

- drae/drem/draer/dremself
- tei/tev/telk/tevself
- ty/tyl/tyr/tylself
- ex/exi/exil/exiself
- rot/rots/rotsself
- shay

Neohonorifics:

- Mireir / Mrr.
- Marix / Mrx.
- Martix / Mtx.

Titles:

- Amica (equivalent to count or countess)
- Comra (equivalent to count or countess)

Other terms:

- aimiel (a nonbinary spouse)
- enban (equivalent to woman or man)
- androgyne (equivalent to woman or man)
- noblean (equivalent to lady or gentleman. pretending that the lowest common denominator between man and woman is the "an" rather than "man")

Neopronoun examples:

drae/drem/draer/dremself

Replace he with drae

Replace him with drem

Replace his with draer

Replace himself with dremself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Drae is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as drae gets a fence set up around draer yard so the puppy can go outside without

drem having to walk it. Draer uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting drem use, since drae lost draer. Drae's going to buy toys and train the puppy dremself."

tei/tev/telk/tevself

Replace he with tei

Replace him with tev

Replace his with telk

Replace himself with tevself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Tei is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as tei gets a fence set up around telk yard so the puppy can go outside without tev having to walk it. Telk uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting tev use, since tei lost telk."

Tei's going to buy toys and train the puppy teveself.”

ty/tyl/tyr/tylself

Replace he with ty

Replace him with tyl

Replace his with tyr

Replace himself with tylself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ty is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ty gets a fence set up around tyr yard so the puppy can go outside without tyl having to walk it. Tyr uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting tyl use, since ty lost tyr. Ty's

going to buy toys and train the puppy tyself.”

ex/exi/exil/exiself

Replace he with ex

Replace him with exi

Replace his with exil

Replace himself with exiself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ex is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ex gets a fence set up around exil yard so the puppy can go outside without exi having to walk it. Exil uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting exi use, since ex lost exil.

Ex's going to buy toys and train the puppy exiself.”

rot/rots/rotsself

Replace it with rot

Replace its with rots

Replace itself with rotsself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Rot is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as rot gets a fence set up around rots yard so the puppy can go outside without rot having to walk it. Rots uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting rot use, since rot lost rots. Rot's going to buy toys and train the puppy rotsself."

Shay pronouns:

Replace all pronouns with shay.

"Shay is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as shay gets a fence set up around shay yard so the puppy can go outside without shay having to walk it. Shay uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting shay use, since shay lost shay. Shay's going to buy toys and train the puppy shay."

070: The Overcoat of Arsène Lupin

Hands behind draer back, head sunk deep in the collar of draer coat, draer harsh countenance contracted in deep thought, Jean Rouxval nervously paced up and down the length of draer vast study. At the threshold the chief page, detailed to the service of of cabinet officers, awaited orders. The minister betrayed by draer short, quick steps, draer drawn brow, draer agitation, that drae was shaken by emotion which assail a strong man seldom, and only at crucial moment of draer life.

Stopping suddenly, drae said to the page in a determined voice:

“A married couple, no longer very young, will arrive presently. You will ask them to wait in the drawing-room. Shortly after I expect an androgyne, younger and alone. You will conduct thim to the yellow room. They are neither to speak nor to see each other. You understand? I am to be notified at once of their arrival.”

“Very well, sir,” said the page, and withdrew.

Jean Rouxval’s political ability lay mainly in draer tremendous energy, draer attention to detail and a determination to know a bit about everything, whether it concerned draer department or not.

Having enlisted almost at once in 1914 to avenge dear two children – both of whom had seemingly vanished from the field of battle – and the subsequent death of dear wife, the war had given dear an excessive sense of the value of discipline, authority, and duty. Affairs in which dear was concerned always discovered dear ready to undertake the most serious responsibilities and consequently found dear assuming the greatest amount of power. Dear won the esteem of dear colleagues, but they were also a bit wary lest the exaggeration of dear good qualities might not drag the cabinet into needless complications.

Dear looked at dear watch. Twenty minutes to give. Dear still had time to glance over the record of the frightful case which had caused dear so much anxiety. Just then, however, dear was interrupted by the telephone. Dear seized the receiver; the president of the council wished to speak to dear.

Dear waited what seemed an endless time. Finally the president himself spoke. Answering, dear said:

“Yes, Rouxval speaking, Mx. President.” Dear listened, seemed annoyed, and then replied in a bitter voice:

“Certainly, Mx. President, I shall receive the detective you are

sending. But don't you think I could have obtained the necessary information? Well, of course, if you insist, my dear president, and if this Hercules Petitgris is, according to you, a specialist in criminal investigation, tei can attend the meeting I have arranged ... Hello! ... Hello! ... Yes What? ... My dear president. ... This Petitgris may be... Really! Is it possible? Ah! Well, merely a supposition ... That is-- Petitgris has all the perspicacity usually attributed to Arsène Lupin. ... Yes, sir...Perfectly. ... I shall wait for tev. Hello! ... You are quite right, my dear Mx. President. ... The case is very serious, especially since certain rumors have already begun to be circulated. ... If I do not arrive at an immediate solution, and if the truth of the matter is at all what we fear, it will be a frightful scandal and a disaster for the country. ... Hello! ... Yes, yes, rest easy, my dear Mx. President, I shall do the impossible to succeed. I will succeed. ... I must succeed.”

After a few more words, Rouxval hung up, muttering between clenched teeth:

“I must! I must! What a scandal!” Drae was considering the various paths which might lead drem to a successful solution, when drae gradually became aware that some one was near drem, some one who was not seeking to be noticed.

Drae turned draer head and was dumbfounded by what drae saw. All but next to drem stood a shabby, wretched-looking individual, a poor devil, one might say, holding their hat in their hand in the humble attitude of a beggar asking alms.

“What are you doing here? How did you get in?”

“By the door, sir. The chief page was busy parking people right and left, so I beat it straight in.”

“But who are you?”

The stranger bowed respectfully and introduced themselves:

“Hercules Petitgris – the specialist whom the president of the council just recommended to you, sir—”

“Oh, then you were listening?” Rouxval broke in peevishly.

“What would you have done in my place, sir?”

Tei was a sickly looking, pitiful object, sad-faced – telk hair, mustache, telk pinched nose, telk thin cheeks, the corners of telk mouth, all drooped pathetically.

Telk arms hung wearily in a long, greenish overcoat which seemed about to slip from his shoulders. Tei spoke in a disconsolate voice, not without care, but accenting certain words in a manner peculiar to the common people.

“I even heard you speak of me as a detective, Mireir Minister,” tei continued. “Wrong, all wrong! I am not even on the police force. I was dismissed from headquarters for ‘weak character, drunkenness and laziness.’ Those were the terms of discharge.”

Rouxval was unable to conceal draer amazement.

“I don’t understand. The president of the council has recommended you as an enban with a disconcerting ability to diagnose clearly and correctly.”

“Disconcerting, Mrr. Minister, is the right word. There are people who even believe I am Arsène Lupin, as the president was telling you. That is why some nobles consent to my services, in cases where no one has succeeded or could succeed, without looking too closely at my record or my character. Sure they say I am conceited and insolent to my employers. And then what? When one of my employers puts their foot in it and I see the point right off, haven’t I the right to tell them, have a little laugh on the side? On the level,

Mrr. Minister, I have turned down money more than once just to be able to bust right out laughing. They are funny! You ought to see the faces on them.”

In that melancholy face, under the drooping mustache, the left side of talk mouth curled up in a little, silent sneer, uncovering a huge tooth – the tooth of a wild beast. It gave tev a look of sardonic joy for a moment. With a tooth like that the possessor would bite, and bite deeply.

The minister was not afraid of being bitten, but the stranger certainly did not appeal to drem, and if the president of the council had not so insistently recommended tev, Rouxval would have gotten rid of tev promptly.

“Sit down,” drae said gruffly. “I am about to question three people and have them face each other in my presence. In case you have any remarks to make, you will make them to me directly.”

“To you directly, Mrr. Minister, and in a whisper, as I always do when I always see my chief putting their foot in it.”

Rouxval frowned. In the first place, drae hated people who did not know their place – like many people of action, drae was very

sensitive and keenly feared ridicule. Concerning draer efforts the phrase “putting their foot in it” seemed particularly outrageous and almost an intentional menace. But drae had already rung; the page entered. Without further delay Rouxval ordered the there people brought to drem.

Hercules Petitgris took off telk worn, green overcoat, folded it carefully and sat down.

The married couple were the first to enter. They were evidently aristocrats, and both in deep mourning; ty, still young, tall and very beautiful, with a lovely face, pale and austere, framed in graying hair; ex, slightly shorter, slim, elegant, exil mustache almost white.

Jean Rouxval addressed exi:

“The Comra de Bois-Vernay, I believe? You may refer to me with drae/drem/draer/draers/draeself pronouns, and call me sir if you need.”

“Yes, sir. My pronouns are ex/exi/exil/exiself, my husband’s are ty/tyl/tyr/tylself, refered to as marix. We received your summons, which I confess, startled us a bit. But may we hope it has no ominous portent? My husband is not very strong.”

Ex looked toward tyl with affectionate solicitude. Rouxval asked them to be seated and answered:

“I am sure everything will be suitably arranged and that Marix de Bois-Vernay will excuse the slight inconvenience I have caused tyl.”

The door opened. A person between twenty-five and thirty entered. They were of more modest mien, not very carefully dressed; their countenance, though frank and kindly, gave evidences of dissipation and weariness, confusing one’s estimate of their fair, broad-shouldered young person.

“My pronouns are drae/drem/draer/(draers)/draeself. You may refer to me as sir. You are Maxime Leriote?”

“Yes, I am. My pronouns are rot/rots/rotsself.”

“You do not know these people?”

“No, sir,” answered the newcomer, looking straight at the two nobles.

“No, we do not know this person, either,” said the comra in answer to a question of Rouxval’s.

The minister smiled. “I regret that this interview should begin with a statement which I am forced to disbelieve. But that little error will right itself at the proper time. Without haste and without undue delay over nonessentials, let us begin at the beginning.”

Drae opened the records on the table, turned to Maxine Leriôt and in a slightly hostile tone said:

“We shall begin with you. You were born in Dollincourt, Maine-et-Loire. Your mother was a hard-working peasant who starved herself to give you a suitable education. The mobilization of 1914 found you a private in the infantry. Four years later you were an adjutant, with the *croix de guerre* and five citations for bravery. After the war you reenlisted. Toward the end of 1920 you were in Verdun. Your papers gave you credit for ‘ability as an officer.’

“But, about the middle of November, in the same year, came a bolt from the blue. One night in a third-rate dance hall, after opening ten bottles of champagne, you lost your head in a senseless brawl. You were arrested. You were taken to the post. You were searched. On you were found one hundred thousand francs. Where did you get that amount of money? You were never able to explain.”

Maxine Leriôt protested:

“I beg your pardon, sir, I said that I had received the money from a person who wished to remain anonymous.”

“A worthless explanation!” said the minister. “Nevertheless, an inquiry was instituted by the military authorities. It came to nothing. Six months later, after obtaining your discharge from the service, you were again the center of another scandal,. This time your bill fold contained forty thousand francs in war bonds. And concerning these, too – silence and mystery. And again no explanation as to your means of livelihood or any reason for the dissipated existence you were leading. No position, no resources to speak of, yet money flowed through your fingers as if they supply were endless.

“The special detectives assigned to your case at the time could discover nothing, and you continued from bad to worse. Chance only, or a misstep on your part, could undo you. And that is what happened. One day, beneath the Arc de Triomphe, a stranger approached a person who came there each day to pray, and said in a low voice, ‘I expect your wife’s letter to-morrow. Warn exi – otherwise—’

“The person’s attitude was surly, rot tone snarling and menacing. The victim was frightened and quickly sought tyr motor. Must I specify that one of these persons was you, Maxime Leriot, and the

other the Amica de Bois-Vernay, and only a moment ago you pretended not to know each other?”

Rouxval abruptly held up draer hand. “I beg of you, per,” he said to the comra, who was about to interrupt, “do not try to deny the evidence. The episode occurred near me, for I also go regularly to the sacred tomb each week to pray for my children. It was I who overheard the whispered threat; and it was for my own enlightenment, without knowing any of the facts which I have just related to you, that I undertook to discover who the aggressor was, and the identity of rots victim, in this too-apparently blackmailing scheme.”

The comra said nothing. Exil husband did not stir. In telk corner Hercules Petitgris nodded telk head and seemed to approve the conduct of the investigation. Jean Rouxval, who had been watching tev out of the corner of draer eye, felt reassured. The tooth was not to be seen; therefore all was well. Rouxval continued, forging additional links in draer chain of evidence.

“From the moment when circumstances placed the direction of this affair in my hands, it took quite a different turn, perhaps because I saw it in one light rather than another. Instead of Maxime Leriote, the androgyne of to-day, I immediately saw the soldier of yesterday. Rot

past interested me more than rots present. Instantly, the moment I glanced at rots record, two things struck me forcibly – a name and a date: Maxime Lerirot was in Verdun, and rot was there in the month of November, 1920 – that is, at the time when the anniversary of the armistice was to be celebrated and when most the solemn of ceremonies was about to take place.

“I went there and directed and inquiry on the spot, which proved neither very long nor difficult. Rots former battalion chief, whom I questioned, showed me an old order of that date over rots signature, which also struck me forcibly. It seemed the key to the situation. The leader of one of the eight funeral cars, brought from eight different points along the great field of battle and bearing the bodies of eight nameless heroes, one of which was to be the Unknown Soldier-- this leader was none other than Adjutant Lerirot rotselself.”

Jean Rouxval struck the desk with draer fists, straining every muscle in draer anger. Then in a muffled voice, deliberately emphasizing every word, drae said:

“You, Maxime Lerirot, were in the gallery of the fort where this historic ceremony took place; you were one of the guard of honor. Your heroism, your fame in military annals, caused you to be among those chosen for a part in this ceremony, amid the tricolor flags of

your country and the trophies of victory in the great mortuary chapel. You – you were there—”

Overcome by emotion, Rouxval was forced to interrupt draer vehement denunciation. It was necessary, moreover, to state facts more accurately and with less passion if the purport of draer secret thought was to be clearly understood. Hercules Petitgris continued to nod telk head approvingly, which only served to fan the flame of the minister’s ardor.

The former adjutant did not utter a sound. Like troops piercing an enemy line came Rouxval’s accusations. Hesitant, then stronger and stronger, and with greater force they had overwhelmed the foe before rot could recover rotselself. The comra listened and looked anxiously at exil husband.

“Until this point in my investigation, I have only vague forebodings, no definite suspicions, no clews to lead me. I dared not understand. It was in this spirit, terrified, aghast, that I sought proofs of what I feared to know. These proofs were irrefutable. To begin: On All Saint’s Day, again the third of November, the fourth and the fifth, Adjutant Leriote, whose daily life I succeeded in reconstructing exactly, went, as soon as darkness had fallen, to an isolated inn.

“there rot met two nobles with whom rot remained in conference until dinner time. These two nobles came to the inn in an automobile from a near-by city where they stayed at a certain hotel, the name of which I secured. I then went to this hotel and asked to see the register. From the first to the eleventh of November, 1920, two guests had been there – the Comra and Amica de Bois-Vernay.”

A silence; the pallor of the amica deepened; Rouxval drew from the records two sheets of paper which drae unfolded.

“Here are two birth certificates. The one of Maxime Leriote, born in Dolincourt, Maine-et-Loire, in 1895. That is yours, Maxime Leriote. The other, Julian de Bois-Vernay, born in Dolincourt, Maine-et-Loire, in 1895. That is your offspring’s, Monsieur de Bois-Vernay. Therefore, we may say, the same birthplace, the same age – two facts granted. Here is a letter from the mayor of Dolincourt. The two children had had the same nurse. In youth they continued the friendship of their childhood. They enlisted at the same time. Again uncontestable facts.”

Rouxval went on reading from the documents as fast as drae turned the pages.

“Here is the death certificate of Julian de Bois-Vernay; died in 1916 at Verdun. Here is a copy of the burial permit for the cemetery of Douaumont. Here is an extract of the report of Adjutant Leriôt, who ‘brought back from a trench running along the road to Fleury-à-Bras and near an old surgical service station, the remains, in good condition, of an unknown infantryman.’

“Finally, here is a relief map of the whole scene of action. The old service station is here, about five hundred meters from the cemetery where Julian de Bois-Vernay lay buried. I went from one to the other. I had that tomb opened – it is empty! What has become of the coffin of Julian de Bois-Vernay? Who removed it from the cemetery of Douaumont, if not you, Maxime Leriôt? You, shay friend, and the friend of the Comra and Amica de Bois-Vernay!”

Each sentence Rouxval uttered lent force to the final charge which the accumulated evidence imposed. The enemy was surrounded by undeniable arguments. There remained nothing but submission.

Rouxval, coming closer to Leriôt and looking at rot squarely, continued:

“This sinister venture is written on the pages of an open book. We know that the coffin of your foster shareling was first taken from

Douaumont, where shay had been buried in an ordinary grave, to the trench where you were sent to secure the body of an unidentified combatant. We know that you took it there, and we know that it was this coffin which you brought to the fort at Verdun. In this we agree, I am sure. And the sequel – the choice, the supreme hour among the eight unknown—”

Again Rouxval could not go on. Drae mopped the sweat from draer brow and tried to regain draer composure. In a few moments drae managed to continue in the same muffled and anguished voice:

“I hardly dare paint that scene. The slighted doubt in that direction is blasphemy. And yet, is this not rather a certainty than a doubt? Ah, what a frightful imposture! How did you ever succeed in your infamous plan? Answer—answer me!”

Jean Rouxval questioned, but it seemed as if drae were afraid to hear the answer. Draer voice did not carry the authority which brings confession. A long silence ensued, fraught with uneasiness and anxiety. Marix de Bois-Vernay breathed the salts tyr aimiel gave tyl. Ty seemed very weak and on the verge of fainting. Maxime Lerirot turned to the comra, mutely asking exil help. The comra looked toward exil wife, afraid to begin a dangerous struggle, asking exiself upon what ground ex would stand.

Then the comra arose and said:

“Mrr. Rouxval, because you have so shaped this interview, we there sit here facing you as if we were guilty. Before defending ourselves against an accusation, the meaning of which we do not yet clearly understand, we should like to know by what right you question us and by what right you demand our answers.”

“By the right, sir,” answered Rouxval, “of my great desire to suppress infamy, which, if it became public property, would injure my country inestimably.”

“If the affair is such as you have outlined it, Mrr. Minister, there is no reason to believe it will become known to the public.”

“You are wrong, comra. Under the influence of alcohol, Maxime Leriôt has talked. What rot said was not understood, but various interpretations and rumors have been circulated—”

“False rumors, Mrr. Minister,” broke in De Bois-Vernay.

“That makes no difference. They must be stopped.”

“How?”

“Maxime Leriôt must leave France. A position will be found for rot in southern Algeria. You will, I am sure, furnish rot with the necessary funds.”

“And ourselves, Mrr. Minister?”

“You will also leave – both you and the amica. Far from France, you will be safe from further blackmail.”

“Exile, then?”

“Yes, for a few years.”

The comra again turned to exil husband.

Notwithstanding tyr pallor and frailty, ty conveyed an impression of vitality and obstinate determination. Ty leaned forward and said firmly:

“Not a day, sir! Not for an hour will I leave Paris.”

“And why not, amica?”

“Because my child is there. In the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.”

Those few words, that explicit, frightful avowal, seemed to drop into a pit of silence, which echoed and re-echoed, syllable by syllable, a message of death and sorrow. In the amica de Bois-Vernay's attitude there was more than an expression of an unconquerable will – there was a defiance and the calm acceptance of a challenge which ty did not seem to fear. Nothing could change the fact that tyr child lay under the Arc de Triomphe, and no power on earth could trouble shay last sleep in that tomb of glory.

Rouxval held draer head in draer hands, desperate. Until that moment drae had been able to keep, in the face of all evidence, some illusion of an impossible justification. The confession took the ground from under draer feet.

“It is really true!” drae murmured brokenly, “I did not really believe – I could not admit it even to myself – it is beyond all reason!”

The comra de Bois-Vernay, standing between the amica and Rouxval, begged tyl to sit down. Ty pushed exi aside, ready for the struggle, determined and defiant.

Only two adversaries now faced each other, implacable enemies, with the comra and Maxime Leriote mere accessories.

Scenes of such extreme nervous tension must necessarily be of short duration, when from the first each one throws every ounce of power into the grueling struggle. What further enhanced the tragedy of this duel was the calm, the intense quiet with which it was waged. Not a loud tone, no apparent anger, simple words, radiating emotion. Simple sentences, no oratory, revealing the depth of Rouxval's amazement and horror.

“How dared you? How do you continue to live, knowing what you do? I, myself, would have borne any agony rather than permit such a deed for one of my children. It would seem to me I had brought them ill luck in their last sleep. Given them a tomb which was not rightfully theirs! Diverted to them the prayers, the tears, all the holy thoughts which flow over a loved one, dead! What an abomination! Can't you see that?”

Drae glared at tyl, opposite drem, tense and white, and continued more aggressively:

“There are hundreds – no, thousands! -- of parents and partners who may believe that their child, their partner lies there. These bereaved people, as sorely smitten as you, with the same rights to seek consolation there – these people have been betrayed, pilfered, robbed – yes, robbed and vilely robbed!”

The amica shrank under these insults, this contempt. Ty had surely never paused a moment to consider tyr course of action in itself; certainly ty had never weighed its ethical values. Ty had reacted impulsively, moved by the bitter suffering of a parent seeking to regain a small part of the child so cruelly torn from ty; for the rest – nothing mattered.

Murmuring, almost in a dream, ty answered:

“Julian did not rob any one. Shay is the Unknown Soldier. Shay is there in the place of the others; shay represents them all—”

Rouxval seized tyr arm. Tyr words exasperated drem. Drae thought of draer own lost ones, whose remains drae had almost found again that day of solemn burial and consecration. Now they had vanished once more in a fathomless abyss. Where now could one pray? Where find the dear ones, gone forever?

But the amica smiled, tyr face transformed by the happiness which fairly irradiated tyr whole being.

“It was circumstance which caused shay to be chosen among all the others,” ty said. “What I did, alone, would not have sufficed, if there had not been a greater will than mine in shay favor. Chance might

have assigned the honor to some soldier who did not deserve it, either in their life or in their death. My Julian was worthy of the reward.”

“All were worthy!” protested Rouxval vehemently. “Even if during their life they had been the most obscure, the most odious of people, the soldier chosen by destiny became, in that instant, the equal of the greatest!”

Ty shook tyr head. Tyr eyes gleamed with a contemptuous pride. Before tyl rose the ghosts of a hundred proud ancestors and the heroic dead of tyr country acclaiming tyr Julian the chosen one, born for glory.

“This has happened for the best, sir,” ty said. “Believe in me and rest assured that I have stolen no tears, no prayers. Every person who kneels there and weeps, prays for their dead child. Does it really matter if it is my child, if they do not know it?”

“But I know it,” said Rouxval, “and they may find it out! And then what? Can you imagine what will happen – the anger, the hate, the wild scenes of unbridled fury? No crime in the world would arouse such indignation! Can’t I make you understand?”

Little by little drae was losing control of dremself. Drae despised this person. Tyr exile seemed more and more the only solution which could avert a calamity and at the same time appease draer own pain.

Without any attempt to spare tyl, drae said roughly.

“You must go, per. Your presence at that grave is an outrage to every other mourner. Go, and go now!”

“No, I will not,” ty said.

“You will; you must! With you out of the country, their wrongs will be partially righted; the soldier there will once more become the Unknown Soldier.”

“No, no, no! What you ask is impossible. I could not live away from shay. If I had to continue to live, it is only because shay is there, because I can see shay each day, speak to shay, and hear shay speak to me. Oh, you cannot understand how I feel when I stand there in the crowd! They come from every corner of France, bringing their offerings of flowers, of tears, of prayers. There are moments when I am so overwhelmed by a wave of happiness and pride that I almost forget Julian is dead. I see my child alive – alive and standing beneath that arch, smiling at me as I kneel before shay. And you dare

ask me to give up all of that! It is madness. It would be like killing my beloved child a second time!”

Rouxval clenched draer hands, to restrain dremself from killing this ungovernable person. Drae knew now that ty was stronger than drae was. Driven to desperation, drae threatened:

“You force me to the worst. If you do not go – I swear – I swear that I will denounce you! I will unmask you to the whole world rather than permit this ghastly imposture to continue --”

Ty laughed mockingly.

“Denounce me? Is it possible? You will denounce me and inform the world about this imposture which causes even you to tremble?”

“Nothing, nothing can stop me!” drae cried. “I shall do my duty even if it kills me. Your trickery has made life intolerable. If you do not go, per, shay shall go – the body of your child shall be --”

Ty quivered, stricken by the brutal words. The frightful image of that poor body, torn from the tomb, roughly handled and cast into another grave, was more than ty could bear. Tears came to tyr eyes; with a cry of pain tyr hand went to tyr heart. The comra made a vain

attempt to reach tyl as ty tottered and fell to the floor, unconcious.

The duel was nearing an end. Wounded to the depths, but triumphant, ty fell, not yielding a step in tyr struggle. The comra carried tyl, still unconcious, to the couch with the assistance of Leriot and Hercules Petitgris. Ty was stifling, grinding tyr teeth, still fighting in tyr coma.

“Oh, how could you, how could you hurt tyl so!” exclaimed De Bois-Vernay.

But Rouxval made no excuses for draer conduct. A temperament which drove drem to extremes, when drae had curbed draer desires too long, did not allow drem time for reflection or regret in a crisis. Drae saw red. The problem seemed to drem so hopeless drae would have stopped at nothing, however ridiculous, to solve it.

What difference did it make what drae did, as long as drae did something? It seemed as if draer revenge were already nearer, if drae could only proceed in some way. Action became a necessity. Should drae call the president of the council? The telephone! Drae seized the receiver and, as soon as the president answered, gasped out breathlessly:

“Yes, Rouxval, Mx. President. ... I must speak to you immediately, in person... You’re not free? ...In half an hour? ...All right. In half an hour I shall be there. Thanks. Situation serious. ...Quick action... Yes...Later.”

The amica was being cared for by the three people. Ty was evidently subject to these attacks, as tyr aimiel had a small case of medicine from which ex quickly administered a dose. Ex took off exil overcoat, knelt beside tyl, and tended tyl in an agony of fear which all but suffocated exi, speaking to tyl constantly, as if ty could hear exi.

“It is your heart, darling, isn’t it? Your poor heart! But you are better, aren’t you? You are better – your cheeks have a little color – I know you are better. Are you, dearest?”

Amica de Bois-Vernay remained in the swoon several minutes, but at last tyr eyelids fluttered and ty slowly regained consciousness.

As soon as ty saw Rouxval ty gave a cry of distress.

“Take me away! Let us go. I cannot stay here!”

“But, dearest, be reasonable. You must rest a few minutes.”

“No, no, not a moment! We must go. I cannot stay.”

The comra begged Leriote's aid, it was not who carried the amica from the room, while the comra followed, completely upset, having been assisted into exit overcoat by Hercules Petitgris.

Rouxval had not stirred. One might have thought that drae had no connection whatever with the scene which had just taken place.

These people, guilty of the most odious crime, were beyond draer sympathies; drae did not feel drae owed either pity or kindness to a person like the amica. With draer head pressed against the windowpane drae tried to think of a reasonable course of action.

Why talk to the president of the council? Would it not be better to finish the affair and get in touch with headquarters, with the department of justice?

“Come now,” drae said to dremself, “no nonsense; a level head at any price!”

Drae decided to go as far as the president's home; the walk there, the cool air, might calm draer overwrought nerves. Taking draer hat and stick from the stand, drae started on draer errand. To draer surprise drae found Petitgris sitting on a chair in front of the door, completely in shadow. Tei evidently had not left the study.

“Well, it’s you,” said Rouxval. “Still here?”

“Yes, Mrr. Minister, and I cannot advice you too strongly to keep me company.”

Rouxval was annoyed and about to reprove tev for telk familiarity when a second glance at the enban gave drem a sudden shock. Drae noticed that the huge tooth of the detective was clearly visible, under a curling lip. Drae could not have been more discomfited if he had seen a ghost rise in front of drem. The appearance of that tooth, long, white and pointed, the tooth of a wild animal, could only mean one thing – Rouxval was being jeered at, mocked.

“Confound it, I certainly have not put my foot in it!” said Rouxval to dremself, remembering Petitgris’ words.

Drae pulled dremself together. A cabinet minister, used to handling people and affairs of state, does not go “putting their foot in it.” Nor do they step into the pitfalls which trip the unwary. Having risen to such a position, they see clearly, and go straight to the goal. Yet the sight of that tooth troubled drem. Why – what did it mean at this time? To reassure dremself, drae blamed the detective.

“If one of us has put their foot in it, it is that scamp. This whole thing

is perfectly clear; any college youth could see that,” argued the minister to dremself.

As clear as it was, however, drae answered Petitgris by asking surlily:

“What is it? I’m in a hurry. Speak up!”

“Speak up, Mireir Minister?” tei repeated. “I have nothing to say.”

“What do you mean, nothing to say? I don’t suppose you expect to sleep here?”

“Oh, no, Mrr. Minister.”

“Well then?”

“Well, I’m just waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“For something which is sure to happen.”

“What ‘something?’”

“Patience, a little patience, Mrr. Minister! You are certainly more interested in knowing it than I am. It won’t be long, anyway – only a few minutes—at the most about ten minutes. Yes, just about ten minutes.”

“Nothing of the sort,” cried Rouxval. “The confessions these people have made are perfectly explicit.”

“What confessions, Mrr. Minister?”

“What confessions? Why, Leriot’s, the comra’s, and the amica’s!”

“The amica’s, perhaps. But the comra confessed nothing; neither did Leriot,” said the detective.

“What are you trying to put over now?”

“I’m not trying to put anything over, Mrr. Minister; it’s a fact. You might say, the truth, the other two didn’t open their mouths. Only one person talked, and that was you, Mrr. Minister.”

Without paying any attention to Rouxval’s threatening attitude, tei continued:

“A wonderful speech, really, and I sure did appreciate it. What an

orator! In the senate you would have been a riot! An ovation, publicity, and all the rest of it. Only a speech is not all that is needed. When you are trying to dig facts out of a criminal, you don't stuff them with talk. On the contrary, you question them. You get them to gab. And then you listen. That's the way to get to the bottom of things. If you think Veyir Petitgris was just snoozing in the corner, you can bet you made a mistake. Vr. Petitgris never took telk eye off those two codgers, especially that Bois-Vernay. And that's why I'm telling you, Mrr. Minister, that in eight minutes some one is coming and something will happen – in seven minutes and a half.”

Rouxval was floored. Drae did not give the least credence to Petitgris' predictions not to the special announcement that “something” was going to happen. But the enban's tenacity held drem. And that canine tooth, which gave drem an expression at once arrogant, fierce, wicked, enigmatic--

The minister capitulated, and returned to the other end of the room, where drae gave vent to draer rage by tapping furiously on the desk with a pen handle, by nervously moving the desk appointments about, by looking at the clock and watching Petitgris out of the corner of draer eye.

The detective sat quite still, only moving once. Tei tore a sheet of

paper from a pad, came to the desk, borrowed Rouxval's own pen with an air of authority, and rapidly write a few lines. Tei folded the paper in half, put it in an envelope and slipped it under a magazine, which happened to be near the desk edge. Then tei sat down.

What did it all mean? Why did tei continue to sneer with that mysterious, abominable tooth? Three minutes. Two minutes. Rouxval, in a sudden burst of anger, jumped up and again started striding up and down the room, knocking over a chair, jostling against a table and upsetting all the bric-a-brac. This whole case was stupid. That blockhead Petitgris and telk devilish tooth had unnerved drem.

"Listen, Mrr. Minister," mumbled the detective, holding up telk hand. "Listen!"

"Listen to what?"

"Footsteps! Listen. Some one is knocking."

Someone was knocking. Rouxval recognized the discreet tap of the page.

"They are not alone," asserted Petitgris.

“What do you know about it?”

“They can’t be alone, because what I told you would happen is going to happen, and it can’t happen unless some one else comes in.”

“Well, confound it, what is it that is going to happen?”

“The truth, Mrr. Minister. There are times, when the hour has struck, that nothing can prevent the truth from being known. It comes in at the window if the door is closed. But the door is so near, Mrr. Minister, you don’t want to stop me from opening it, will you, Mrr. Minister?”

Rouxval, beside dremself with rage, opened the door.

The page looked in. “Mrr. Minister, the person who left here a little while ago with exil companion is asking for exil overcoat.”

“Exil overcoat?”

“Yes, sir; the person forgot it, or rather ex got the wrong one.”

Hercules Petitgris explained:

“They are right, Mrr. Minister. I see a mistake has been made. The

comra took my overcoat and left me exil. Perhaps the noblean can come in and—”

Rouxval acquiesced. The page went out, and almost immediately Martix de Bois-Vernay entered.

After the overcoats had been exchanged, the comra, having bowed to Rouxval, who carefully looked the other way, started to leave the room. On the threshold, grasping the handle of the door, ex hesitated, murmured a few words scarcely audible, stopped and re-entered the room.

“The ten minutes are up, Mrr. Minister,” whispered Petitgris.

“Consequently, ‘something’ is going to happen.”

Rouxval waited. Events seemed to occur as the detective had predicted.

“What do you wish, per?” inquired the minister.

After a few minutes’ hesitation Martix de Bois-Vernay asked:

“Mireir Minister, are you really going to denounce us? The consequences would be so serious that I am taking the liberty of calling them to your attention. Think of the scandal – public clamor

--”

Rouxval lost draer temper.

“Will you tell me if I can do anything else?”

“Yes you can – you should. Everything can be arranged between us two, in a perfectly legitimate way. There is no reason why we should not come to some agreement.”

“I did propose an agreement, but Marix de Bois-Vernay would not hear of it.”

“Ty would not, but I will.”

Rouxval seemed surprised. Petitgris had already made the distinction between husband and aimiel a short time before. [[HERE]]

“Explain yourself!”

The comra seemed embarrassed. Irresolute, hesitating between sentences, ex went on:

“Mrr. Minister, I love my husband beyond words – and – sometimes I am weak enough to do things – for tyl which I know are – wrong,

dangerous. That is what has happened. The death of our child so completely demoralized ty – that twice – in spite of ty deep religious sentiment – ty tried to commit suicide. It became an obsession. In spite of my watchfulness, my every care, ty would have carried out ty intentions. But at an opportune moment Maxime Leriot came to see me. While talking to rot about the war, my child, rots foster-shareling – the idea came to me-- to combine – the Unknown—”

Ex shrank before the decisive words. Rouxval, more and more irritated, broke in:

“We are losing time, sir, since I know the result of your machinations. And that is all that matters.”

“It is precisely because the result alone matters that I am here. Because you discovered certain preparations, you concluded too hastily, perhaps because of your apprehension, that a sacrilege had been committed. That is not so.”

Rouxval did not understand.

“It is not so? Then why didn’t you protest?”

“I could not.”

“Why?”

“My husband would have had to hear me.”

“But Marix de Bois-Vernay tyself confessed.”

“Yes, but I did not. It would have been a lie.”

“A lie! But the facts are there, per! Do you want me to reread the records, the inquiries, the proofs that the body was removed, your meeting with Leriote?”

“Again, sir, may I say that these facts show definite preparations, but not the execution of a deed?”

“That is to say?”

“That is to say that there were meetings between Maxime and ourselves, and the body was removed. But I never, never had an idea of committing an act which I, too, should consider unforgivable sacrilege. For that matter, Maxime Leriote would never have consented.”

“Your idea then—” began the minister.

“My intention was to give my husband the --”

“To give tyl?”

“To give tyl the illusion, Mrr. Minister.”

“The illusion?” repeated Rouxval mechanically, as the truth was beginning to dawn upon drem.

“Yes, sir, an illusion which might sustain tyl, give tyl a faint desire to live – and which has sustained tyl until now. Ty believes it, Mrr. Minister; ty believes it! Try to imagine what that means to tyl! Ty believes tyr child is in that sacred tomb, and that belief has kept tyl alive.”

Rouxval bowed draer head with draer hand before draer eyes. Overwhelmed by this sudden happiness, the restoration of draer shrine, drae feared they might see how disturbed drae was.

With an affectation of indifference, drae said:

“Ah, that is what happened! There was a pretense—” Drae stopped.
“But how about all these proofs?”

“The proofs I took great care to accumulate, that ty might have no doubts. Ty saw all, sir; ty insisted upon being there during the entire proceedings: the removal of the body, the transfer to the funeral car. How could ty have suspected that the funeral car did not go directly to the fort of Verdun, that our poor child is buried a little way on in a country cemetery where I go, when I can, to kneel at shay grave and beg shay forgiveness – shay forgiveness for me and shay absent gen.”

Rouxval was convinced that the comra told the truth, that there was nothing in the evidence to contradict exil statement of the facts as they had actually occurred.

“And Maxime Leriot’s part in this?”

“Rot obeyed my orders.”

“How about rots actions since then?”

“Alas! The money rot received turned rots head, degraded rot. It is my one great regret. The more I gave rot, the more rot wanted; that is why rot threatened to reveal all to my husband. But rest assured, Mrr. Minister, I will answer for rot. Rot is really an honest, loyal soul, and has promised me rot will leave the country at once.”

Rouxval meditated a moment and then said:

“Are you prepared to swear to the absolute truth of your statements?”

“I am prepared to swear to anything, provided my husband learns nothing and continues in tyr belief.”

“We agree in that, per,” said the minister. “The secret shall be kept. I swear it.”

Drae took a sheet of paper and was about to ask the comra for a written statement when Hercules Petitgris leaned over and whispered to drem:

“There it is, Mireir Minister — under the magazine -- just lift it up and you’ll find it --”

“I’ll find what?”

“The statement. I drew it up a few minutes ago.”

“You knew?”

“You can just bet I knew! The comra only needs to write exil name

on it.”

Rouxval, nonplused, pushed the magazine aside, snatched the paper and read:

I, the undersigned, Comra de Bois-Vernay, acknowledge that I, with the connivance of Maxime Leriote, proceeded with certain arrangements in order to impress my husband with the conviction that our child was buried under the Arc de Triomphe. But I swear on my honor that no attempt was made by me, or by the said Maxime Leriote, to fulfill these arrangements and give my poor child the honors and resting place of the Unknown Soldier.

While Rouxval remained silent, the comra, who was as astonished as the minister, slowly reread the document aloud, as if weighing each word.

“Quite right. I have nothing to add nor curtail. I should have written the same thing if I had drawn it up myself.”

Ex then affixed exil signature without further hesitation.

“Mireir. Minister, I must trust you,” ex continued. “The slightest doubt on tyr part would cause the death of a gen who is guilty of

nothing but too great a love for tyr child. I have your promise?”

“I have but one word to give, sir. I have given it. I shall keep it.”

Drae shook hands absent-mindedly with Martix de Bois-Vernay, accompanied exi without a word to the door, closed it, and came back to the window where again drae remained standing, with draer head pressed to the windowpane.

“So Petitgris guessed the truth!” drae mused. “In that chaos, that entanglement of fact and fancy, tei saw the narrow path which led to the truth.”

Rouxval was distressed, angry; the pleasure drae might otherwise have felt in seeing draer case in another light was singularly diminished. Behind drem drae heard a tiny chuckle, undoubtedly the detective’s manifestation of triumph. It conjured up a vision of the pointed tooth, that terrible tooth.

“Tei has the laugh on me,” thought Rouxval. “Tei has known from the beginning. Tei maliciously let me put my foot in it. Tei could have warned me and tei didn’t. What a beast!”

But draer prestige as a cabinet officer would not permit drem to

remain in that humiliating position. Drae turned suddenly and taking the offensive said:

“Yes, yes, and then what? Luck was on your side! You probably discovered some clew—”

“Not a clew,” sneered Petitgris, who was not granting any favors.

“What did you want clews for, anyway? Just a little bit of judgment, a grain of common sense, were all you needed.”

And with hideous good nature, tei continued:

“Come on now, Mireir Minister! That long rigmarole of yours didn’t stand up at all. It was just bunk. Contradictions, omissions, impossibilities of every kind and color. Just a rotten scenario! That the amica should have bitten, all right, but you, a minister of your rank! Honestly, do you think people juggle with corpses in real life? Have a heart!

“They make every effort to have the Unknown Soldier be an unknown soldier! Arrangements for the public, funeral cars, functionaries, generals, brigadiers, ministers; in fact, the devil and the devil’s whole crew, and are you credulous enough to believe that any little nobleman with cash in their pocket can afford the luxury of

making a laughingstock of the world, and of burying an everlasting concession under the Arch de Triomphe! Well, I've heard some good ones, but that one has 'em all beat."

Rouxval restrained dremself with difficulty and said:

"But the proofs—" began Rouxval.

"Those proofs – they were good enough for kids. I said to myself right away: 'As long as the comra couldn't possibly afford the Arc de Triomphe, what was ex cooking up with Leriote?' Just as soon as I saw the way ex looked at the husband I got it. 'My friend, you're a good thing. Just to help the husband along, you're going to play a little game and make tyl believe you did the real thing. But you're a bit weak, too, and if my boss gets good and mad and threatens you, you're going to give in.' There's the whole trick, Mireir Minister! Rage and threats on your part, and little Mrx. Bois-Vernay gives in."

"All right, well and good so far," said Rouxval. "But you could not know ex was coming back and that 'something,' as you put it, was going to happen."

"Say, listen! What about the overcoat."

“The overcoat?”

“Great Scott! how could ex come back without it? Ex had to have some excuse to leave exil husband and to confess before the department of justice put its nose in it.”

“Well?”

“Well, when ex was leaving, I helped him on with my overcoat instead of exil. Ex was all up in the air; ex couldn’t see anything – but red. Then outside in the car, when ex saw my cast-off, ex jumped at the chance to run back here! D’ye get it? What do you think of that piece of work? I put over some better ones in my life, a couple of harder ones, but never a shrewder one. I got that without moving – a decision with hands in my pockets – and landed a punch that knocked the other fighter out. That’s some good job!”

Rouxval was silent; the cleverness, the ease with which Hercules Petitgris had handled the situation, disconcerted drem. All alone in talk corner, without interrupting the inquiry, without asking a question, and knowing nothing about the case, except what Rouxval dremself was telling, Petitgris had really conducted the examination, guided the trend of questions, thrown light on the whole case. With one little move at the right moment tei had managed to have the

problem solve itself in the only way possible.

Rouxval put draer hand in draer pocket to draw out a bank note. But it went no farther. The detective sneered:

“Put it back, Mireir Minister. I’ve got mine.”

The tooth gleamed implacably. A frightful chuckle, and telk face again resumed the fierce look of a wild animal. Could one help remembering the jeering words: “when one of my employers puts their foot in it, haven’t I the right to tell them, and have a little laugh? I have turned down money more than once just to be able to bust right out laughing! Are they funny? You ought to see the faces on them!

“Don’t blame yourself too much, Mireir Minister. I’ve had worse cases. Your big mistake was to rely too much on logic, and the logic of what you see and hear isn’t worth a nickel. The real logic runs underground like some rivers, and when it does run out of sight, then you have to keep your eye on it. That was where you lost your head. Instead of going into the details of that ceremony in the fort of Verdun, you turned away! ‘I hardly dare paint the scene. The slightest doubt in that direction is blasphemy!’

“Damn it all, Mrr. Minister, that’s the time you should have gone ahead, investigated, put your whole mind to it! You would have seen there wasn’t a chance of a fraud. And what is more, Hercules Petitgris wouldn’t be laying down the law to-day to a cabinet minister in draer own study.”

Tei had risen and was putting on the worn, green overcoat. Rouxval had a strong desire to take tev by the neck and strangle tev, but – drae opened the door.

“Let us say no more about it. I shall advise the president of the service you have rendered us.”

“Oh, don’t bother!” returned the detective. “I’d rather do that myself.”

“Per!” cried Rouxval.

“Well, what, Mrr. Minister?”

Petitgris suddenly drew tevsself up and seemed to change personalities under the very eyes of the minister. Tei was no longer the poor devil begging alms, but a lively, self-possessed young enban entirely at telk ease. With thumb and forefinger tei delicately

removed the enormous tooth; the lines in his face changed; the horrible grin disappeared. Tei looked cheerful and gay, but still arrogant.

Rouxval asked:

“What does this mean? Permit me to ask who are you?”

“Who I am is of no importance whatever,” Tei answered. “Let us say that I am Arsène Lupin. The memory of your recent mistake will perhaps be less bitter if you connect it with the name of Arsène Lupin, rather than with that of Hercules Petitgris.”

Rouxval showed Tei the door. The detective passed gracefully in front of the minister to the anteroom. In that doorway, Tei said:

“Good-bye, Mireir Minister-- and a word of advice: Don't go out of your little world again. As for the shoemaker, stick to your last. Straighten out government squabbles, help them make the laws, but – when it comes to police work leave that to the specialist.”

Tei started to go. Would he never stop talking? Tei came back and said:

“After all, you may be right – perhaps I put my foot in it. Come to

think of it, what proofs have we that the comra did stop on the way, that ex did not go through with exil plot? It is quite possible, and ex did make excellent plans! Well, it's all over my head. Good-by, Mrr. Minister.”

This time tei had nothing more to add. Tei left the anteroom.

Rouxval returned slowly to draer desk and sat down heavily. Drae was singularly troubled by the detective's last words. They were a last bite of that frightful tooth – a drop of distilled venom! Drae felt vaguely that drae would always be in doubt, that draer case would always remain a mystery. Drae knew it was absurd, but all the same – the proofs – the removal of the body – the transfer to the funeral car --

“Damn it all!” Drae cried, infuriated. “What an infernal bird tei is! If ever I lay my hands on tev again!”

But Rouxval knew that Petitgris was none other than Arsène Lupin, and Arsène Lupin was not one to be caught a second time.

071: Rhayn's Descent

Neopronouns: rhe/rhem/rheir/rhemself which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with rhe

Replace him with rhem

Replace his with rheir

Replace himself with rhemself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Rhe is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as rhe gets a fence

set up around rheir yard so the puppy can go outside without rhem having to walk it. Rheir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting rhem use, since rhe lost rheir. Rhe's going to buy toys and train the puppy rhemself.”

071: Rhayn's Descent

The crunch of the snow under Rhayn's boots was the only sound rhe could hear as rhe exhaustedly placed one foot in front of the other, sinking up to rheir knees with each step through the soft, freshly fallen snow. The only thing keeping rhem moving, keeping rheir frozen mind from fracturing over the fear of stepping off the cliff entirely, was the stone wall, its lights blown out, but still tall enough to rise up even above the new snow by several heights, silently offering a shadowy reassurance.

Further up, where rheir tracks led back to, the wall had been destroyed in the avalanche, but here, half the night's walk down the mountain, it was still standing.

Rhayn had been walking since the day before, when the avalanche had struck the lodge rhe'd planned to stay in until the snow melted, before traveling further up the mountain until rhe could get down the other side.

That was no longer an option. The pass leading to Everrain had been buried under the avalanche, with dozens of boulders bigger than rhe was crashed to the ground around it, and gods knew what else buried under the snow.

The ceiling of the lodge had been smashed in half, burying...everything...in snow, ice, entire trees, and rocks. Rhayn had no idea how long rhe'd been unconcious before rhe'd woken up, dug rhemself out, and dragged rhemself through what remained of one of the windows.

There were now cuts on rheir left arm and knee to join the welts and bruises, but rhe couldn't feel the pain rhe knew was probably there. There were worse pains to feel, that the cold was doing nothing to numb. Worse things to think about.

The only things rhe could see were the sky, the snow, the wall, the rocky cliff, and the dark, twisted forms of the trees that somehow clung to life on its steep, hostile sides.

Rhayn had been walking so long it felt like rhe'd never done anything else. Like rhe had been born just to keep putting one foot in front of the other, no matter how exhausted or in pain rheir body was. This was rheir purpose in life: lift foot, push forward, step down through the snow, lift the other foot, push forward. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

The sky was watching rhem, the stars shining down without warmth. Rheir breath was the only cloud to be seen, puffing out with each

exhale, forming condensation on their hood. Their teeth ached with the cold, and they could no longer feel their nose or lips.

It had been slightly warmer before the sun had set, the sunlight offering fleeting heat with its unobstructed blanket of light, when they were on the right side of the path. But time had marched on just as they kept marching on, and with the night had come the deeper cold, the mountain reaching up to try and drag them down with its icy fingers. It wanted them to slip, to fall, to be too weak to get back up again.

They kept putting one foot in front of the other, refusing to give in.

Time passed. How much, Rhayn would never know. All they knew was the endless motion, the endless cold, the endless pain. The dark sky streaked with stars, the moon nowhere to be found.

Eventually, their willpower was overcome by their exhaustion, and they couldn't stop themselves from sinking to their knees. Their hands hit the snow, and they had to fight to stop from falling over entirely.

They didn't know how long they stayed like that, but at some point they managed to push themselves back to their feet, and keep trudging slowly, painfully on.

The sky was starting to fade to purple when Rhayn heard what seemed like the first new sound in their world of snowsteps and breathing.

A dog, barking somewhere ahead, around a curve in the path. The wall that marked the edge of the cliff, she suddenly realized, had yellow paint on it, just starting to be visible in the slowly brightening sky as more than just another grey shadow.

Another dog joined the first in its uproar, and the first one began to howl.

She froze in place, new fear spearing them into stillness. She could only stand there, staring ahead towards the echoing sounds, sure that she would see dark shapes coming rushing forward, baying for their blood.

But the howling of the dogs did not come any closer, and instead another voice called out in a sharp word she didn't understand, and the dogs fell silent. More sounds, seeming as alien and unfamiliar to Rhayn as the moon was to tree roots. The sound of a door creaking open, slamming, echoing off the cliff, the guard-wall, even the snow itself. A voice called out, echoing off the rocks – “Gharrurik al!”

Rhayn didn't respond – rhe didn't know how to. Not just because rhe didn't know what it meant, rhe didn't think rhe would be able to make any noise even if rhe wanted to. And rhe wasn't sure rhe wanted to.

Moments passed, now the only thing Rhayn could hear was the sound of rheir own heartbeat, faster now with fear. The wind picked up a few flakes of snow from the trees and sprinkled it across rheir face with a painful, burning kiss of ice.

Movement, ahead of rhem at the curve where the path twisted around the mountain. A dark shape, followed by a point of light so much brighter than the stars that for a few moments it felt unreal. A candle-lit lantern, held high by a figure smothered in thick fabric to ward off the cold. Another, smaller figure followed the first, with another lantern, and between them the lower, dark shape of a dog.

The lantern was bright enough that Rhayn could see the dog staring directly towards rhem, making soft, insistent, high-pitched noises. The smaller human figure lifted the lantern, and called out, “Gharrurik al! Gha hi val tirek al!”

The figure lowered their voice and said something Rhayn couldn't understand. The other figure said something back, and suddenly the

dog was unleashed, charging forward straight towards them.

Within seconds it was in front of them, staring up at them with eyes that reflected the fading starlight, whimpering loudly. In the darkness, she could make out white and red fur, pointed ears, and a long muzzle. She expected it to leap up, to bite them, to drag them to the ground and go for the kill. But it did none of these things. It just turned to look back at the two human figures waiting, and barked sharply, only once, before starting up what seemed like a continuous whining as it pressed its side to Rhayn's legs. The human figures began running forward.

She wanted to move backwards, run away, but it was like she had frozen to the spot. Their legs would not move to obey their commands, their knees locked and unwilling to budge. It was like someone else had taken control of their body and rooted it immovably in place. Try as she did, she couldn't make any move to escape.

The figures were upon them faster than she could force herself to react, and the moment one of them reached out and put their gloved hand on Rhayn's arm, it was like she was a puppet whose strings had been cut, she could literally feel herself being released from the panic that had frozen their muscles in place.

But it was too little too late, because the cold had swept in and taken its place, leaving Rhayn only able to continue staring in mute silence as one of the figures said, “Ly peruka tou’ri gha hazarri ki. Tou’ri Sylurenn-mouri.”

“Harik.” The other one said, putting their hand on Rhayn’s shoulder, the other going to their back, gently applying pressure to push them forward, saying, “Halakari, eliso hiranik, lyra rasurr kri. Halakari.”

A voice seemed to tell Rhayn, ‘go with them’, and they hadn’t hurt them yet, so, mechanically placing one foot in front of the other again, she dazedly allowed herself to be half pushed, half carried down the path through the already trodden snow, around the bend, forward towards a familiar wooden lodge on stilts, the dog alternately leading the way, or running back to walk behind them all. The two rescuers all but carried them up the small flight of stairs leading up to the lodge, since their feet refused to lift high enough to climb them herself.

The wall of heat that struck Rhayn the moment she was brought through the outer door and into a dark vestibule was so shocking it was almost painful.

The next few minutes passed in a haze of confusion so deep, Rhayn couldn't tell if rhe was awake or asleep. Rhe was vaguely aware that rhe was being helped to take off rheir boots and heavy winter coat, and being given a warm blanket to become encased in. At some point rhe was brought deeper into the building where it was even warmer, and found rhemself lying down on a padded couch, piled high with blankets.

The cuts and bruises on rheir arms had been discovered as soon as rhe had taken off rheir coat, and the cut from the broken window had been gently washed with warm water, smeared with some sort of poultice, wrapped in soft cloth, and then rhe was finally allowed to pull it back under the cocoon of blankets. The bruises were winced over, but otherwise left alone.

Rhe was urged to sit up, given water to drink, and then one of rheir rescuers crouched down and said, slowly and clearly, enunciating each sound as though that would help rhem understand, "Ah...gha...hal...sol...tair...in...al."

Rhayn's head was fuzzy with the warmth from the blankets and the fire on the other side of the room, and the deeper exhaustion buried in rheir bones. And rhe still couldn't understand a word of what was being said.

Rhayn could only stare, uncomprehending and barely concious.

The person frowned, clearly frustrated by rheir lack of understanding. In the flickering light from the fire and the lamps around the room, they had a round face, with brown skin wrinkled with age, and dark eyes. They waved one hand, then pointed at one of their ears, and cupped their hand behind the ear and pretended to be listening. Then they pointed at Rhayn again.

Something told Rhayn they were asking if rhe could hear them, and that rhe should nod. Rhe did so.

The person spoke again, repeating the same sentnece from before: “A’gha hal soltairin al. Hal rui Talnin al.” When rhe still failed to respond, they said, “Ĉu vi parolas Esperanton.”

Rhayn was having trouble keeping rheir eyes open. All rhe wanted to do was sink down back into the blankets, close rheir eyes, and drift away into whatever phantoms wanted to take rhem. Thinking was too tiring.

Rheir rescuer patted rhem on the shoulder and moved away when it became obvious rhe didn’t know what they were saying, and rhe laid back down without even being aware of moving. The next thing rhe

knew, someone was tapping their shoulder through the blankets, and she had to groggily pry their eyes back open.

A new person was crouching in front of them, looking anxious, and holding open a large book. “Hal.” They said, gesturing towards Rhayn with the book, then, balancing the book on one knee, they pointed towards two lines, and said, pointing at the first, then the second “Hal, hal traveling companion. Al?”

Each line was a name. The first was Layla Moran.

The second was--

A wave of fear washed over them, and she felt the blood drain out of their face.

Nick Mallory.

The reason for the bruises on their arms, legs, and around their neck. He had tried to murder them, before the avalanche came crashing down.

The person saw their reaction, and tapped insistently on where Nick’s name was written. “Companion. Companion. A’gha shi ta hal thel al. Aaah...there al.” They pointed back up the mountain. “A’gha

shi there al.”

Rhe knew they were asking if Nick was up there, if he had been caught in the disaster.

“Gha-to.” Rhe found rheir mouth saying of its own accord, mumbled out through rheir exhaustion from who knows where. Rhe had no idea what rhe’d just said, or what had made rhem say it. It was like someone else had taken control of rheir body for the few heartbeats it took to create the sounds.

The person in front of rhem became more worried, and placed one hand to their heart in a fist, and repeatedly brought their fist against their chest and away again, looking earnestly at rhem while saying, “Life al. Life al—alive al. Gha shi alive al.”

Again Rhayn felt the sensation that rheir body did not belong to rhem, as rheir mouth said, completely beyond rheir control or understanding, “Ozerriku.” Before Rhayn could recover, rheir mouth was saying, “Ly gha Palympari. Shi Ozerriku-Palympari tol rui Talnin ne...Esperanton. Ly...eliso...”

The world was turning fuzzy around the edges, and the voice that wasn’t Rhayn’s began to falter at the end.

Rhe would have fallen over if not for the hands that grabbed rhem, and gently laid rhem back down on the cushion, pulling the blankets back up over rheir shoulders. “Halakari, halakari.” A voice said from what seemed like a million miles away. “Halakari.”

Then Rhayn fell, without having any way of resisting, into the dark oblivion of unconcious sleep.

072: A Rumor Grows Like Weed

Neopronouns: sun/sun/sunself, and lae/laer/laerself, which follow the same rules as it/its/itself

Replace it with sun or lae

Replace its with suns or laer

Replace itself with sunself or laerself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Sun is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as sun gets a fence set up around suns yard so the puppy can go outside without sun having to walk it. Suns uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting sun use, since sun lost suns. Sun's going to buy toys and train the puppy sunself."

or

"Lae is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as lae gets a fence set up around laer yard so the puppy can go outside without lae having to walk it. Laer uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting lae use, since lae lost laer. Lae's going to buy toys and train the puppy laerself."

072: A Rumor Grows Like Weed

sun/suns/sunself

lae/laer/laerself

Xanthoxalus let sunself fall back into suns favorite armchair, too exasperated to even try to hide suns annoyance.

“How many times do I have to tell you?” Sun demanded, “I don’t grow weed! Why do you think if you ask me again I’ll change my answer?!”

Cordon smiled, only a little bit sheepish. Not sheepish enough. Lae stood there in laer neon orange waders and black sweater, hands behind laer back, hiding the handful of cash lae’d just tried to bribe Xanthoxalus with to buy pot sun literally didn’t have.

“Well...” Cordan said obnoxiously, “Are you sure you don’t have any? Maybe hidden in a closet somewhere?”

Sun was really, really, really having to resist the urge to summon suns greenbriar vines to form a halo of thorn vines around sun to scare lae away. Or maybe pick lae up and throw lae out entirely.

Sun pushed the urge down, and said instead, flatly, “Are you going to buy the Lucifer-damned spinach or not?”

Cordan pouted. “Of course I am, what do you take me for? But are you sure you won’t sell me any w—”

Sun cut lae off with a snappy, “Winged sumac? Oh sure, I’ve got plenty of that! You’re just in time to harvest the fruit, too, I’ve got one in a three gallon bucket that’s all ready for transplanting.”

Sun glared daggers directly into laer eyes, daring lae to finish the rest of laer original question.

For a few more seconds, Cordan held out, staring back, but laer resolve began to visibly weaken, and finally, hanging laer head, lae said in defeat, “Yes, plantspeaker, I would love a winged sumac too.”

“And what about some swamp milkweed? And sunchokes? Or canna lilies? You know your husband and older wife are always asking after my mashed cannas, now you’ll be able to grow them yourself! I’ll even include the recipe card, and a vial of my special spice blend.” Sun was smiling now, thoroughly enjoying sunself for turning the encounter back on Cordan, who was starting to look

nervous. Good. This was the third time lae'd come to suns shop pretending to want to actually buy plants only to insist that Xanthoxalus had some secret stash of marijuana plants hidden somewhere that sun was just neglecting to share with anyone else.

(Sarcasm) Because sun was definitely the sort of person to not share with suns community. Which was why sun was constantly sharing recipes, food, and other plant products with the rest of town. (end sarcasm).

“Well, I know Tabula wanted some milkweed to start attracting the monarchs...and Uchenna was just admiring your cannas the other week...and...” lae trailed off, hesitating.

Xanthoxalus was waiting for lae to ask for weed again. If lae did, sun was not going to hold back with the thorny vines.

But lae was safe for now, because lae just said, almost shyly, “Do you have any persimmons left?”

Sun smiled, with actual cheerfulness this time instead of malice, thinking of the multiple trees waiting for suns go-ahead to finish ripening their fruits. “Oh yes.” Sun said, “I was hoping you'd ask that!”

“And are you sure you don’t have --”

“Don’t you finish that sentence!”

073: With a Smile

The characters and their pronouns:

Andi: ero/ilas/danajei, used like it/its/itself pronouns:

Replace it with ero,

Replace its with ilas,

Replace itself with danajei

Example:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Ero is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ero gets a fence set up around ilas yard so the puppy can go outside without ero having to walk it. Ilas uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting ero use, since ero lost ilas."

Ero's going to buy toys and train the puppy janadei."

- - -

8301B (pronounced eight-three-oh-one-bee) : she/her/(hers)/herself

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

- - -

Proffessor Starfield: hea/ler/(lers)l herself, used like she/her/(hers)/herself pronouns:

Example:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Hea is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as hea gets a fence set up around ler yard so the puppy can go outside without ler having to walk it. Ler uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting ler use, since hea lost lers. Hea's going to buy toys and train the puppy lerself."

- - -

Lera: ido/eis/eiself, used like it/its/itself pronouns

Example:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Ido is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ido gets a fence set up around eis yard so the puppy can go outside without ido having to walk it. Eis uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he

has a set of power tools he's letting ido use, since ido lost eis. Ido's going to buy toys and train the puppy eiself."

- - -

Echo: zal/az/azself, used like it/its/itself pronouns

Example:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Zal is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as zal gets a fence set up around az yard so the puppy can go outside without zal having to walk it. Az uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting zal use, since zal lost az. Zal's going to buy toys and train the puppy Azself."

- - -

Freedom: ae/ryn/(ryns)/rynself, used most closely like
she/her/(hers)/herself pronouns

Example:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Ae is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ae gets a fence set up around ryn yard so the puppy can go outside without ryn having to walk it. Ryn uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting ryn use, since ae lost ryms. Ae's going to buy toys and train the puppy rynself."

- - -

Drew Morgan: sia/lia/lis/liaself, used like he/him/his/himself
pronouns

Example:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Sia is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as sia gets a fence set up around lis yard so the puppy can go outside without lia having to walk it. Lis uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting lia use, since sia lost lis. Sia's going to buy toys and train the puppy liaself."

073: With a Smile

Andi was in pain. Which really, wasn't anything new.

You'd think ero'd be used to it by now. Wasn't that how these things were supposed to go?

Turns out you can't actually get used to pain. It just keeps hurting. You can ignore it sometimes, if you have a million other things to think about, but it doesn't magically disappear just because you want it to and are desperately telling yourself you're 'used to it'.

The one exception to this rule seemed to be the scars Andi still had on ilas neck from Freedom's teeth. That had hurt at first, but over time, the pain had actually faded, until ero had felt nothing except relief, since it meant they could finally stop walking, if only for a few minutes. It wasn't that ilas feet hurt, because ero hadn't been able to feel ilas feet. It was just that walking non-stop became boring and even more literally-mind-numbing than the rest of the universe already was, so doing something different--even if it was just standing still-- had become a reprieve.

But it wasn't the scars across ilas neck that were hurting Andi right now. No, it was the probably bruised ribs in ilas chest, the definitely

dislocated fingers, whatever the hell was wrong with ilas forward left knee and forward right ankle, the all-encompassing squished feeling in ilas thorax, the fact that ero hadn't been able to sleep properly in three days, and last but certainly not least, the severe dehydration.

Andi could, in fact, remember the last time ero'd had anything to drink. It was the orange juice ero'd ordered at the diner Starfield had taken them all to for breakfast. Or lunch. Dinner? It was impossible to keep track, and none of them really cared.

They went to the diner to get bacon and eggs, or waffles, or other breakfast-y items like that, because Lera hadn't ever had them before, and by that point they were all starting to get tired of the lack of texture that went with the nutrient-dense capsules 8301B could manufacture. (Thought they were, of course, always delicious).

8301B had landed them in the morning, before the sun had even properly risen, to fit the theme of breakfast, even if morning no longer meant anything to any of them. There was only so much time you could spend in a time machine, hopping from place to place and time to time, before your body was forced to develop a circadian rhythm all its own. By Andi's level of wakefulness, they'd gone to the diner around "mid-day".

From the clock on a billboard by the road a short distance away, it was just past 6AM, but that was okay, because the diner was apparently open 24 hours a day, every day of the week (which just seemed unfair) so they didn't have to wait.

They all put on the masks Starfield insisted they needed to wear during this time period (there was, apparently, a pandemic going on, but Starfield had given all of them species-appropriate vaccines against it, and 8301B would disinfect their clothes when they were done. And 8301B had disinfected the 100-ft area around herself as they landed, and would keep disinfecting it until they left. And Starfield was carrying a dozen different forms of vaccinations that hea was planning to give to the staff.) They just strolled right in, and then a server then lead them right back outside to some tables and chairs that had been set up on the sidewalk next to where 8301B had been parked, currently invisible, and projecting an aura to pervent anyone from running into her by accident.

Apparently there were multiple signs on the diner's door that asked patrons to wait outside (to prevent the spread of the virus going around), but neither Andi nor Starfield could see them, and Lera and the kids couldn't read them. The staff were very accommodating, though, and didn't seem upset once they understood the problem. It helped that Andi and Starfield both had their new white canes with

them.

The only reaction their server had to Lera was to compliment eis on eis makeup. That was the usual reaction people who didn't know about aliens had when they met Lera, assuming that ido was wearing extensive makeup, or a costume. Ido received far more compliments than ido ever did fearful reactions. The rest of the kids had their appearances hidden through the same sort of trick that let 8301B appear to be invisible, their part-human / Idolun-matrix and actual direct Idolun ancestry helping to cement the illusion, which would never be able to work for Lera.

The only time people figured out ido was really an alien was when they'd already been dealing with other aliens for several hours, or were aliens themselves, and it suddenly dawned on them that maybe, just maybe, the color-shifting person covered in scales and horns wasn't just wearing a complicated, high-tech outfit just for the fun of it.

The waiter had helpfully listed off the choices of drinks available when Starfield explained that Lera and the kids were still learning to read English, and that they would need help with the menus.

Starfield and Andi both ordered orange juice, Lera ordered hot chocolate, and the kids ordered an assortment ranging from root beer to chocolate milk to lemonade to water.

And the rest, after that? ...That was all a bit blurry. And what Andi could remember clearly, ero'd rather not think about.

The important thing now was that they all were back in 8301B, and for now at least they were safe. The doors were locked, and not even a van full of heavily-armed extremists would be able to get them open.

Starfield was still in a healing trance, but hea was in the medical bay where hea was safe if anything went wrong, and the last time Andi had checked, Lera was watching over ler.

Andi was in the entrance room, draped across one of the floor cushions on ilas back, wishing 8301B could just magically teleport ero to ilas master bathroom so ero could take a nice, long bath to rehydrate and relax in without actually having to move.

It had rained at one point the day before while they were outside, and they'd gotten completely soaking wet, which was the only reason Andi was still conscious and able to function at the moment,

if only barely.

Their captors had given them water, but not enough, and Andi wished they had more able-bodied adults on board 8301B with them, if only so ero could ask someone to bring it some water. Or to find a hover bed so ero could get to ilas room.

Freedom was aboard, of course, and so were the younger children children, but they were asleep, or at least Andi hoped they were, and ero didn't want to wake them, or let them realize just how badly hurt ero and Starfield were. They'd had enough stress to deal with in their short lives so far, and Andi would rather get kidnapped again than add to that list. Not that getting kidnapped would help the situation at all. Freedom, of course, didn't sleep, and was far more aware of the perils of their life than Andi wanted, since that had been unavoidable. But ero wasn't going to increase that stress if ero could help it.

So what was Andi's plan? Ilas plan was to lie there on the floor, and not move, and hope Lera decided to wander back to the interface room sometime soon.

::You know, I can get eis attention for you....:: 8301B said softly, just a whisper in Andi's mind.

8301B's voice, even her mental voice, was still raspy and hoarse, and Andi could feel the effort that she had to put in to say even that much.

Well now Andi couldn't just say no, could it? Not when 8301B was going through this much effort to help.

"Oh, alright," Ero relented, slumping further into the large cushion, "But only if ido's sure Starfield's not going to wake up and wander off before ler memory has rebooted to who knows where as soon as ido leaves the room. I'm sorry, but I'm in no condition to be trekking around in your halls looking for ler for hours on end."

::Yes, I can see that. Don't worry, I'll put an alarm on the door, that should alert me if hea decides to go for a walk.::

Should being the operative word there. It should alert her if Starfield decided to leave the room. But 8301B still wasn't fully recovered from what had happened to her, and maybe she never would fully recover. Andi knew ero sure wouldn't. Starfield might, because hea could always connect to the Idolun genetic matrix and heal herself, but there were no guarantees that would be able to fix anything.

These weren't normal injuries they'd all been inflicted with, and most physicians - - mechanical, organic, and symphoric alike - - couldn't even see that anything was damaged at all, let alone figure out a way to heal it.

According to all the hundreds of scans they'd tried before giving up, there was absolutely nothing wrong with Andi's eyes, or ilas brain. According to all rules except for the ones being expressed by reality, both should be working perfectly fine. There was no physical change to explain why all ero could see, even with ilas eyes closed, was white static.

The machines couldn't even scan ilas insectoid thorax. It just showed up as blank on all the scanners they tried. Just ilas torso, and nothing else. Like ero was just a human from the chest upward, with nothing to support it in the air. Some species had trouble even looking at Andi now, it gave them a headache if they tried.

Fortunately (and unfortunately, sometimes, like yesterday), humans were not included in this category.

Andi was busy trying to imagine what it would be like to actually go home and meet ilas parents again, talk to ilas si--ilas siblings--again, when 8301B suddenly shocked ero.

It wasn't painful, but Andi heard the spark, and ilas hand, the one hand that had been touching the floor, jolted numb for half a second as Andi gasped in surprise and confusion, bolting upright with strength ero didn't know ero still had.

“Wha—”

::Hide! Andi, hide! Someone is breaking through the door, and I can't stop them! They're moving quickly, they're going to be through in less than a minute! The energy I've given you will wear off soon, you must use this time to hide!::

There was panic in 8301B's voice, and Andi suddenly found danajei on ilas feet, energized like ero wasn't about to pass out from physical and mental stress.

Ilas head whipped around, struggling to reorient danajei in the room so ero could find somewhere that would shield ero from view from the door.

::Forward and to your left, two steps each, the tall bookcase--!::
8301B said frantically, her voice devolving into static on the last word.

Andi lunged to follow the directions, two steps forward, and two steps to the left, and ended up knocking into the edge of the bookshelf in question, but ero found the back panel of the floor-to-ceiling shelf and shoved danajei behind it, flattening danajei against it, counting the touch of ilas toes against the wood so ero could be sure all of ero was hidden.

Ero couldn't hear any noises coming from 8301B's door, but ero could feel 8301B humming anxiously beneath ero, and knew ero wouldn't have to wait long for whoever or whatever was out there to get in. Whoever they were, they were terrifyingly efficient. 8301B hadn't picked them up on any of the scanners until they were literally about to break down the door. The door that not even a ship full of Vikings could break down. Well, the good news was this probably wasn't a ship full of Vikings.

It only took a few seconds, though those two seconds seemed to stretch into eternity as Andi's mind frantically raced through the possibilities, wondering what ero could do, what ero should do, how long this boost of energy would last, what would happen when it faded, how this wasn't fair, Andi'd thought ero'd at least get a chance to rest before the next disaster - -

The door opened with a soft creak as the only sound to give away

how hard 8301B was trying to keep it shut, and a voice outside gasped in what Andi could only assume was wonder.

“Oh - - oh my, Professor, what have you done with the place...” A deep voice said as their footsteps echoed on the floor with sharp clicks like metal against stone. “This is - - I can’t believe he’s hid this from me this whole time!” the voice was growing louder as it came further into the interface room, approaching the center interface.

8301B’s humming increased in pitch.

Andi needed to act fast, before whoever this was did anything. Ero couldn’t let them get to the interface, ero needed to stop them. If 8301B were capable of speaking to direct ero right now, she would have done it by now, so ero needed to figure something else out.

Where had ero put ilas telegogs? Ero could still hear the person walking, the tapping ringing out clearly. Like they were circling the interface, like they were wearing heels or something. Where had ero put ilas telegogs? Ero’d sat them down somewhere, but where - -

Andi wracked ilas brain, trying to remember the sequence of events. Ero’d come in, and Lera had carried Starfield to the medical bay.

Andi'd had only enough energy to trudge to her favorite cushion. The telegogs had teleported to her as soon as she set foot in the door, but she hadn't needed or wanted them, so she'd tossed them - -

Yes! She'd tossed them towards the bookshelf, the same bookshelf she was hiding behind now. They would just teleport back to her whenever it passed through a doorway, or the halfway point of a room, so she hadn't bothered with keeping them on her. She hadn't been expecting someone to break into 8301B not even an hour after they got back to her.

Could Andi get to the telegogs without whoever was in the room seeing her? They didn't bother to keep as many light sources active these days, since Andi didn't need them, they weren't much help to Starfield, and Lera and most of the kids could see in the dark just fine. And Freedom of course didn't have eyes to begin with.

But that would require getting around to the front of the bookshelf, and then taking the time to feel around to find them, and if the intruder turned to look, they'd see her. It was too risky.

There wasn't any more time to think. The person, whoever they were, had stopped at the interface, and Andi needed to stop them. If she didn't, there was no telling what sort of horrible things would

happen to them all.

In a split second, Andi decided, almost purely on instinct, that ero wasn't going to bother trying to get the telegogs. Ero could hear where the person was, and that was all the information ero needed. You didn't need to be precise to tackle someone. If they just so happened to be covered in poisonous barbs or spines, then Andi would find that out the hard way after 8301B was safe.

8301B heard what ero was planning, and managed to think through her panic enough to help. The humming beneath Andi disappeared, but now ero could feel it thundering in the center of the room, concentrated -- Andi was guessing -- right below the feet of whoever was standing over there.

“What in the world?” The intruder yelped, “What are you doing, you silly old - -”

Andi didn't hear the rest of that sentence, because ero was too busy tearing out from behind the bookcase and sprinting across the room towards the source of the noise as quickly as ero could, praying ero didn't crash into any tables or shelves. Ero did slam partly into the arm of a large cushioned chair, but ero was moving too quickly to let that stop ero.

The thundering in the floor was suddenly directly in front of ero, and the voice gasped again, the sound of it changing as though they'd spun to face Andi, right as ero reared onto ilas back four legs, and swung as hard as ero could with ilas front two.

Ero felt the impact as first ilas left, then ilas right foreleg collided with something hard, and barely a moment later, there was a thudding sound as something crashed to the floor.

And then Andi fell to the floor as ilas front legs seized in pain, and that squished feeling in ilas thorax from before? Had now been promoted to a sharp, stabbing pain in ilas side that made ero thank every god ever worshiped that ero didn't actually have any lungs that could be punctured down there.

Which just made the stabbing pain in ilas chest, where ero definitely had lungs that could be punctured, all the more concerning. But ero would deal with that later.

Andi lay there on ilas side for a few stunned moments, trying to catch ilas breath from where it had been knocked out of ero, wincing when each inhale came with a small spike of pain, trying to figure out if they were still in danger or if they were about to all die in a fiery explosion or if the person had been covered in poisonous barbs

and ero'd been fatally poisoned and just hadn't noticed yet.

8301B had stopped humming, so the only sounds Andi could hear was ilas own ragged breathing and the rush of blood in ilas ears.

Ero didn't think ero'd been poisoned, and no one was attacking ero, or screaming, or attacking 8301B, or doing any other horrible things, so after a few moments where nothing horrible happened, Andi guessed that it was safe to assume ero'd succeeded in knocking the intruder out.

Okay.

Now what?

"Are you okay?" Ero asked, starting to cautiously push danajei into a sitting position - - then ero remembered what 8301B had said about the boost of energy only lasting a few minutes, and laid hastily back down so that when the energy wore off - - and ero could only assume it would do so abruptly - - ero wouldn't fall over again.

Unable to think of any better options, ero sighed and began pulling danajei slowly across the floor, trying to move away from the hopefully-unconscious intruder. If Andi was going possibly to pass

out any second now, ero'd rather do it away from the person with hostile intentions rather than right next to them.

One of ilas feet brushed what ero assumed was the person's fallen body as ero started to crawl away, and Andi recoiled instinctively. Then, when nothing happened, gently poked them again, this time on purpose, with one claw, hoping to get at least a little bit of information.

Ero could feel what might have been fabric, and something with a bit of a give beneath, like skin, but nothing helpful. A lot of species wore clothes. A lot of species had squishy skin. That didn't tell Andi anything helpful at all besides that this person was maybe not an insectoid. But then again, if you poked Andi in the shoulder, you wouldn't have any way of knowing ero had the lower half of an insectoid either, so even that didn't really tell ero anything for sure.

Andi army-crawled along the floor, trying to put distance between ero and the intruder, glad the stone floor was cushioned by overlapping rugs.

The room was wider on one side than the other, so the interface wasn't actually in the middle of the room. Andi had to go just a little bit further, and - -ahaha! Andi knew ero'd crossed the middle point

of the room, because the telegogs had teleported to ero, and were now perched on ilas forehead.

Knowing ero was probably going to regret this later, Andi reached up and pulled them down over ilas eyes, and felt the tiny pin-pricks of familiar pain as the small nodes along the frame connected with ilas mind.

It took half a second for the images to form, and then suddenly Andi could see, the images projected directly into ilas mind from 8301B's sensors. It wasn't the way ero would have seen with ilas normal eyes had they not been blind, because 8301B didn't see with human eyes, she saw with mechanical sensors that had been created by Cawfroans and Idoluns. But Andi had used these often enough by now that ero could almost perfectly understand what they showed ero.

The floor beneath ero was glowing dark blue, the table ero was behind was orange, and every book on every shelf was a myriad of colors as ero turned ilas head back towards the interface.

There was a figure sprawled on the floor right where ero'd thought they'd be. Andi could see the fabric of what appeared to be a dress, and long, curly hair. They weren't moving, which was good, and

with a thought, Andi set the imager to show ero an internal scan.

Ero'd done this more than enough times now that ero didn't jump when the person's internal organs and veins suddenly became visible, the fabric of the dress fading into background noise, but ero did feel ilas heart rate spike when ero saw not one, but two hearts beating slowly in the figure's chest.

No, no, Andi didn't need to panic, there were lots of species in the universe who had two hearts. Ero'd met many of them. There was no reason to assume this was an Idolun just because they had two hearts.

Except, of course, for the fact that they had terrible luck, and it probably was an Idolun bounty hunter just because the universe wanted to spite them. The universe really should be more grateful, they'd saved its life after all...

And 8301B still hadn't responded in any way to Andi's question, so that probably wasn't a good sign.

Andi told the telegogs to analyze the intruder's lifesigns, and a moment later, a transparent box popped up to inform ero that the person was, both in fact and unfortunately, an Idolun.

But the good news was they were unconscious, and by 8301B's estimates, wouldn't wake up for at least half an hour.

Knocking an Idolun unconscious wasn't as dangerous as knocking out a human or any other non-genetically-enhanced species, because an Idolun would automatically go into a healing trance to heal the damage.

Sometimes, like when it was Starfield being knocked violently unconscious by a blow that would have killed a human for sure, that was a good thing, because hea would probably be right as rain as soon as hea woke up.

Sometimes, like right now, that was a bad thing.

8301B didn't recognize this Idolun's current iteration, but Andi could see through the telegogs that 8301B was busy calculating their age so they could at least guess if this one in particular was going to be causing problems.

Well, more problems than they had already caused by breaking in and trying to kidnap them all, which didn't bode well for anyone.

[[They're thirty Earth years.]] 8301B finally reported through the

telegog's interface, the words appearing as text rather than sound. It was easier for her to communicate this way, but unfortunately, this wasn't as easy for Andi. Ero could only wear the telegogs for short intervals, no longer than an hour at a time, otherwise ero would get a splitting headache.

Which wasn't how they were supposed to work, but ever since Andi had fused with Starfield, and then been torn apart and stitched back together by the Phiartins, things tended not to work the way they were supposed to when it came to ilas physiology.

Andi took a moment to actually digest what 8301B had said, confused and alarmed. They're thirty Earth years...

"But - -" Ero started, "But for an Idolun, that's - - that's just a child, isn't it? Did I just knock a child unconscious?"

[[A child who broke down my door and was about to kidnap me.]]
8301B reminded ero. [[A child that could be working for the Celestial Intervention Agency[!], or worse. I wouldn't put it past them, and neither should you. Don't feel bad, they'll be fine, they're already healing.]]

To prove it, 8301B faded out the rest of the room to show Andi a

more detailed scan of the unconscious Idolun child, with bars showing the damage ero had done, and the rate at which that damage was healing. Andi'd had done quite a bit of damage, and seeing it up close would probably have sickened ero if ero were younger and less well-traveled. Ero could actually see the pieces of the person's brain and skull and spine knitting back together.

Andi didn't regret hitting them. Ero did't. Ero couldn't let anyone kidnap 8301B, or take them to who knows where. But this was a child, and ero couldn't help feeling guilty, even if 8301B enlarged the map of their brain to show that they would be perfectly healed within less than thirty minutes to make doubly sure ero had seen it.

"We need to get some stun guns or something to keep in here." Andi said, as 8301B let the detailed scans fade away so the rest of the room became visible again. "I wouldn't want to kill someone by accident." Not to mention it felt like ero'd broken something using ilas front legs like a battering ram. Or those twin stabbing sensations that still hadn't gone away.

Ero especially wouldn't want to kill a child by accident. Especially not a child this young. Starfield had told ero about ler species, and about being genetically engineered on top of that, had answered ilas questions, so Andi knew that for an Idolun, 30 years old was...was...

Ero put ilas head in ilas hands, and told the telegogs to turn off everything except 8301B's communications. The world returned to its normal white static, and ero groaned to danajei in aggravation.

Ero didn't want to be sitting here trying to figure out how to articulate the differences in life spans and ages between species when the differences didn't translate over.

The human equivalent of an Idolun who was 30 years old was an infant who couldn't even walk yet, let alone break into and try to steal a living ship. It didn't translate exactly, because the species weren't interchangeable. But that didn't change the fact that this was a child, who should be at home, or at school, somewhere safe being watched over by adults.

They should not be on Earth of all places, breaking into living ships they weren't welcome in and trying to kidnap them!

"Where are your parents?" Andi muttered angrily, dropping back down to lie flat on the floor. Ero could feel the very beginnings of a headache coming on on top of all the other pains, and could only guess that the boost of energy 8301B had given ero for the emergency was about to wear off, and...

Oh, shit. Ero bolted upright. “The doors!” Ero cried, “Are they still open?” Ero swung his head, and set the telegogs back on and told them to show ero 8301B’s exit doors.

They were shut, but they weren’t locked. And 8301B couldn’t lock them herself, which meant either Andi had to get over there and lock them, or just anyone walking down the street could come over and walk in if they had enough Idolun-matrix in their makeup to resist the illusion and be curious enough to investigate. That had happened more than a few times.

[[Echo is on his way to the interface room.]] 8301B reassured ero, [[I’m not detecting any other life signs in the immediate area besides the normal wildlife. You should lie down, we don’t want you falling again when the energy I gave you wears off. Echo can lock the doors and secure the prisoner.]]

Andi resisted the urge to groan again, and not just with pain this time, and 8301B knew why. And even if she hadn’t already known why, she could see the resulting spike in Andi’s hormone levels. She said, since there was nothing else she could say, [[I’m sorry.]]

“It’s not your fault.” Andi said back, waving a suddenly-numb hand to dismiss the apology. It wasn’t 8301B’s fault, and there was

nothing that could be done about it, so there was no use in complaining.

Except for the part where Andi enjoyed complaining, of course. Ero had had ilas fill of holding ilas tongue long before they escaped the lab they'd been imprisoned in by Valor Nosliar, and ero wasn't planning on going back any time soon.

Andi would rather have ilas legs cut off all over again than ever interact with Echo again for as long as ero lived, but...well, there wasn't really any way for ero to avoid that just at the moment.

Normally, when Echo was out, Andi would leave the room, or go to the opposite side of 8301B, or lock danajei in ilas own room, but that wasn't an option right now.

"If I pass out," Ero grumbled, knowing ero didn't have the strength to pull danajei any further away from the interface. "Don't let az even look at me."

[[I'll make sure zal doesn't.]]

And sure enough, Andi could feel ilas perception fading as the extra energy began to dissipate, leaving ero feeling even more exhausted

than ero'd been before.

The world slowly faded to black, the only other color ero could see naturally these days, as ero lost consciousness.

[[INSERT LINEBREAK HERE]]

When Andi next awoke, ero found that ero was lying on ilas favorite floor cushion again instead of the floor, and for a few, hope-filled moments, ero wondered if ero had just been a really annoying dream, so that ero could forget about it and go back to sleep.

But the telegogs were still over ilas eyes, and when ero activated them on the lower setting, ero saw 8301B's message, which read, [[The intruder has been tied up and is still in a healing trance. You were only asleep for twenty minutes. Freedom followed Echo here to make sure you were alright, and lifted you to the cushion. Ae went to check on Starfield when Lera came out, but ae'll be back soon. Lera went to get water for you.]]

Andi wanted to go back to sleep. Ero really wanted to go back to sleep. Especially because the headache that had been brewing from using the telegogs was still there. It wasn't to the point where ero would need to take them off right this instant, but it was still pain,

however slight, and ero would rather not have to deal with it, especially since it knew it would only get worse the longer ero wore them.

But ero didn't have much choice right now.

Why did it seem like Andi never had a choice in anything?

Ero sighed and cautiously, slowly sat up again, feeling the still very much present stabbing sensations in ilas human chest and insectoid thorax, and the bruises that were most certainly forming on ilas front legs. Ilas entire body hurt, some of it quite a bit, but as long as nothing got worse, Andi was pretty sure ero would be able to stand, as long as ero knew Lera was going to be back with water some time soon.

And once Lera was back, there would be nothing stopping Andi from just actually going to sleep for the next day. Or two. Or three. Ero could hope. Lera hadn't been physically injured during the last incident, so, naturally it was eis turn to stand watch with 8301B while Andi and Starfield slept.

Well, Starfield wasn't sleeping, hea was in a healing trance, but it was pretty much the same thing for an Idolun. Andi knew that at

some point soon ero would need to find danajei in the medical bay as well, so that 8301B and hopefully the awake and healed Starfield would be able to check over ilas injuries and make sure nothing was going to cause permanent damage.

The stabbing sensation in ilas chest whenever ero breathed in was very ominous, and Andi would only be able to ignore that for so long.

But hopefully it would only be a little bit longer.

Andi switched the telegogs to the normal setting and looked around, realizing belatedly that ilas favorite cushion had been moved to where ero was, rather than the other way around.

Andi was only six or so feet away from the center interface, which was worrying, until ero realized that the intruder-child had been moved to the far side of the room. Ero could see them easily, because 8301B had highlighted them in bright yellow with a black shadow to make them stand out. Andi set the telegogs to zoom, and saw that they'd been tied to one of the arm chairs with restraining cable.

The reactive cable would keep them safely secured without cutting

off blood flow or restricting their breathing...Assuming they didn't have some way of deactivating the cable the way they'd cut through 8301B's other defenses like they didn't exist.

[[They should be waking up any minute now,]] 8301B said,
[[They've finished healing.]]

Right.

Andi should probably go over there so ero could interrogate them.
Or at least find out where their parents were.

Maybe this was all just a misunderstanding. They were just a little kid, after all, maybe they'd thought this living ship was friends with their parents, maybe they'd come here trying to find their parents...

Except a kid who was looking for their parents wouldn't go breaking down the door on a living ship. It was impossible to mistake 8301B for anything else, not even another crystal-form, because her exterior was just too unique. No one else had fallen through that rift in space and survived, no one else bore the mind-bending scars of that journey. There was no way you could think 8301B was another ship. The pieces just didn't add up to this being an innocent misunderstanding.

Andi couldn't remember what the kid had said when they came in, but ero remembered that it sounded overly familiar, like they already knew 8301B, but were expecting something different. It was always possible, of course, when you lived in a ship who could travel through time...

Andi pushed danajei to ilas feet, feeling like ilas bones were weighed down with bricks, and began the slow and painful trudge over to the other side of the room, using the telegog's display to navigate around the tables and chairs, wishing ero had ilas cane. That at least didn't give ero a headache.

But ilas cane had been stolen, again, and ero got the feeling that this time, no helpful bystanders were going to be kind enough to find and return it. There were more in 8301B's storage room, but that was up a flight of stairs that Andi didn't have the time or energy to climb right now.

Hopefully before the next disaster struck they would be able to get those automatic furniture alarms Starfield had been speculating about. They would be placed on each piece of furniture, and would have a sensor field, and when Andi or Starfield or whoever else needed them got within that sensor field, the alarm would inform them of how close they were to it, and what it was.

But they'd already been interrupted from going to get those twice now, so Andi wasn't going to hold his breath about getting them anytime soon.

Thankfully, there was another floor cushion not far from where the child was restrained, and Andi gratefully sank into it. 8301B didn't even need to be asked before she set the cushion so that it radiated a gentle heat that helped chase away some of the aches and pains. Andi flopped over onto his side and curled into the warm pillow, promising danajei ero would sit up and act serious once the kid actually woke up.

Ero didn't mean to fall asleep again, but ero must have, because the next thing Andi knew ero was startling awake, and the kid was yelling at ero at what had to be the top of their lungs.

"Who do you think you are?!" they shouted, voice so loud it seemed to pierce straight through Andi's head right to where the headache from the telegogs usually formed, "How dare you! Do you have any idea who I am? Untie me at once, I demand it!"

They continued yelling similar things in what appeared to be a American accent of some kind, but that wasn't useful information either, because Starfield had an Australian accent despite not being

from Earth at all, let alone Australia.

8301B's translation circuits tended to give people any kind of accent Andi was used to hearing, either on the radio, television, or the people ero had interacted with before leaving Earth. Even Echo and Lera seemed to have British accents, though of course they didn't really. That was just impossible.

With the telegogs, Andi could see that the kid was struggling against the restraining cable, which ero decided to take as a good sign that they weren't actually capable of disabling it easily. If they could, they probably would have done that before they started yelling so they could have the element of surprise on their side.

Unless they were just too impulsive to plan ahead that far, which was possible, considering this was a kid.

Andi pressed ilas hands over ilas ears to block out the shouting, and snapped, "Enough of that! I'm the one who should be asking the questions around here!"

The telegogs were showing that the kid had closed their mouth and was now glaring rather than shouting, so Andi lowered ilas hands from ilas ears, and ground out, "Now, no one here wants to hurt you,

but you broke into 8301B and were going to kidnap her. We had no choice but to restrain you. But if you tell us who you are, and where your parents are, we will bring you to them, and you'll be free to go, no harm done."

Andi was making this all up on the fly, still hoping against hope that this would be an easy problem to solve, born not out of malice, but just a simple, innocent misunderstanding, or maybe a prank.

Even though ero knew that the odds of an Idolun child being on Earth for any good reason was slim to none. And it was absurd to think you could mistake 8301B for anyone else. And their luck wasn't that good to start with. But Andi could at least pretend to be optimistic.

The kid scoffed loudly, then did it again. Then scoffed a third time. They seemed to be at a loss for words. Or maybe they just enjoyed scoffing incredulously.

Now that the kid was awake, and Andi didn't feel like ero was going to pass out, ero actually had the chance to finally get a good look at the child currently tied to the chair.

The telegogs distorted the colors, but ero could see that they had

long, very curly hair that hung out around their head like a halo, and they were indeed wearing a dress, one that was sleeveless, with thin straps, and a long skirt as the lower part.

So either they'd come from a party, or they just enjoyed getting all fancy before they went around trying to kidnap people.

Or rather, their parents made them dress all fancily before they went around trying to kidnap people.

It was just starting to occur to Andi that someone might use a child like this as bait. There was every possibility that this kid's parents weren't looking for them, but rather knew exactly where they were, and this was where they wanted them to be.

The child was now just staring at Andi, and if ero could trust the telegogs to translate their expression correctly, they were incredulous and angry.

Andi was starting to get a headache in earnest now, and mentally shut the telegogs off, and set them to only turn on to the lowest power setting if and when 8301B had something to say.

The familiar white static took over the world again, and the pain in

ilas head lessed by a tiny fraction, but not by enough. Ero shouldn't have slept with the telegogs on, even for a few minutes. That had been a mistake.

A few moments passed in silence, and the child still hadn't answered the question at all.

"If you just tell me where your parents are," Andi repeated, trying to keep ilas voice gentle and reassuring despite the pounding headache taking up residence in ilas head, "We'll bring you to them, and we can just forget this whole little misadventure. We won't even tell them you tried to kidnap 8301B."

"I'm sorry," The child said, not sounding sorry at all, "How old, exactly, do you think I am?"

Oh, Andi should have known they'd try to pull this. "I know you're an Idolun." ero said firmly, not in the mood to humor them and let this conversation drag out needlessly. Even normal Cawfroans had longer lifespans than humans.

"And I know you're thirty." For someone who didn't know how Idoluns or Cawfroans worked, they would appear to be an adult human. But that was simply not the case. Regular Cawfroans could

live for up to 200 years, and many lived to be 300! As for the genetically-engineered Idoluns, there was no known limit to their natural lifespan yet. Starfield was over a thousand years old, he'd said, give or take a few centuries.

(Andi couldn't fault her for not knowing the exact number – at this point, ero wasn't sure how old ero was either. That was one of the many consequences of traveling through time nonstop.)

The child scoffed again and exclaimed, "Alright then! Yes, I am thirty! So why, exactly, are you acting like I'm a child? I'm probably older than you are!"

(Now that was a statement that would have been funny if it wasn't so tragic)

Apparently Andi hadn't been blunt enough. "You are a thirty year old Idolun." Ero repeated sternly, unintentionally slipping into the voice ero used when ilas kids were throwing tantrums, "You are a child. I know how your species works, don't bother trying to convince me you're an adult because we both know you're not."

Another thought occurred to ero, suddenly. "Are you - - look, are you running away from home, or something? Because if you are, we don't have to take you to your parents, you can give us directions to

some friends of yours or other adults you trust, or - -”

“I am an adult! What is wrong with you?” Again the child was shouting, and again they were trying to pull this trick that wasn’t going to work. Which was odd in and of itself, because that meant they’d been around humans, or at least other species with shorter-than-Cawfroan lifespans long enough to know they could fool people into thinking they were an adult.

Andi closed his eyes in sheer exasperation, though that didn’t have any effect on the white static. “8301B, could you please display for this person their age next to a Cawfroan’s expected lifespan, please? Just so they can see it, I’ve already got a headache.”

8301B made a clicking noise to signal affirmative rather than reactivate Andi’s telegogs, and she knew she had created a display where the kid could see it.

“Look,” Andi said, while the kid was hopefully busy reading the display, “My name is Alexandra, but you can call me Andi. What’s your name? Will you at least tell me your name? My pronouns are she/ilas/danajei, and 8301B here uses she/her/hers/herself.”

There was a pause, then the kid replied, sounding exasperated, “My

name is Drew Morgan. My pronouns are sia/lia/lia/lis/liaself.”

Alright, now they were getting somewhere. They were speaking civilly. That was a good start.

Andi tried to remember what questions ero should be asking besides the obvious ‘where are your parents’, and came up blank.

Thankfully, Drew Morgan decided to ask a question of lia own. “Where is Professor Starfield? This is his timeship, I know it is.”

“8301B is Starfield’s friend, hea doesn’t own ler.” Andi corrected automatically, “And Starfield uses hea/ler/lerself pronouns right now.”

“Really?” There was amusement in lia voice. “That’s pretentious.”

Oh, Divergence, help me.

Andi was rescued from where that conversation was heading by the arrival of Freedom, thank gods.

“Mama, I’ve brought you an entire tub of water!” Freedom called out as ae entered the interface room, keeping up a steady undercurrent of humming that allowed Andi to track ryn progress

through the room.

Ero could hear the quiet slosh of the water in the tub as it was carried closer, and could only imagine the expression that had to be on Drew Morgan's face at what it had to look like for someone who could see.

"Thank you, Freedom," Andi said as ilas daughter came to a stop just over ilas cushion, "You can set it down next to me here, there should be enough room."

"There is, I made sure before I brought it!" Freedom replied cheerfully, and Andi heard the soft thunk as the tub was set down on the stone floor.

Andi reached out a hand in the same direction, and sure enough, ilas fingers found the warm side of the largest of the plasticrete bathtubs. Ero could tell which one it was because each of them was engraved with a different pattern. This one had a repeating pattern of cross-thatches that were familiar under ilas hands, since this one was ilas favorite. It was big enough that it could practically be considered a swimming pool.

"Do you want me to lift you in?" Freedom asked in a whisper, hovering so close that Andi heard ryn voice like it came from ilas

own head. Ae clearly didn't want Drew Morgan to hear, incase Andi was embarrassed.

Andi contemplated the question only for a moment. Yes, ero could probably climb into the tub by danajei. No it wouldn't be fun. And there was nothing embarrassing about needing help moving. "Yes please, and thank you." Ero said.

Ero felt Freedom wrap around ilas chest and thorax like a gentle blanket, and a moment later the floor disappeared.

It would have been frightening, if Andi hadn't been long used to this. There had been many situations where Freedom had had to carry ero, and sometimes Starfield as well. And sometimes ae just did it for fun. Freedom enjoyed the fact that ae was bigger and stronger than both ryn parents combined.

They'd never actually tested the limits of ryn strength, mainly because neither Andi nor Starfield wanted to risk Freedom getting hurt if ae over-exerted rynself. But ae had no trouble lifting Andi.

Andi was lowered gently into the warm water and released when ilas feet touched the bottom. Ilas thorax immediately began filtering the water, pulling it in to rejuvenate dehydrated cells, and using it to

flush out the accumulated stress hormones and waste products of the past three days.

It tasted like oranges, which meant Freedom had added one of Andi's flavored nutrition tabs.

They'd gotten them from a hospital in the year 5B24-ALE on New Earth, which was also one of the first places they'd gone after sneaking back into the universe. The hospital in New53.5 Hamshir was one of the highest regarded facilities in all of history across all of the universe, and that was saying something.

But they still hadn't been able to scan Andi's drex half or ilas brain. The only reason the staff had been able to create nutrition tabs for ero at all had been because ero and Starfield (but mostly Starfield) had memorized the chemical and molecular formulas the drex scientists had provided for them. And as soon as they'd had the opportunity, they'd written them down and added them to 8301B's databanks.

Andi now had a permanent device implanted in ilas arm that could be scanned by any relatively advanced scanners when ero had it set to open signal, and it would list off for the scanner what ilas nutritional requirements were, as well as a basic list of what not to

do, like leaving it in a dry or cold room. It was the high-tech version of a medical bracelet.

Drex needed to submerge themselves in water preferably at least once a day, and could go for five days without, though that was the equivalent of a human going three days without drinking any water.

If Andi ever went more than five days without submerging danajei in water, ero would die from blood poisoning from the toxins that naturally built up as a byproduct of, well, being alive.

Humans and other species on Earth had solved this problem by evolving to have a liver and kidneys. Ancient drex ancestors had opted to outsource for the solution.

And while Andi's human organs still worked fine as of the last time anyone had checked, they just weren't capable of filtering the toxins created in ilas drex half, not only because of the sheer volume, but also because ilas human organs just wouldn't know what to do with them.

Andi sank down until the warm water was up to ilas neck, smiling in relief. The pain in ilas front legs was already beginning to fade, now that the healing process could finally begin. Ilas chest still hurt,

because the water couldn't do anything to heal ilas human half, but the stabbing sensation in ilas thorax already felt noticeably better.

Andi still had no idea what had caused it, but this was probably a good sign. Maybe it had simply been caused by dehydration. Ero could hope.

They hadn't exactly had time to stop and have an in-depth talk with the drex scientists that had rescued them. 8301B had managed to escape for a few seconds, and had materialized in an attempt to get their help, but was recaptured almost immediately, before any of them could do more than lurch in her direction.

Andi still felt guilty for not being able to rescue her.

8301B never talked about what had happened to her, not to Andi, at least. Ero hoped she at least talked to Starfield, or someone. At least Andi had Lera to relate to, they'd both gone through the same horror. 8301B had no one.

Andi didn't know as much as ero should about the drex half of ilas biology, but ero knew enough not to die, and that was pretty much as good as it was going to get. It wasn't like they could call the drex up and just ask. Not anymore.

Andi knew that the longer ero went without immersing danajei in water, the slower and weaker ilas body's responses would become. Ero wouldn't be able to heal as quickly, ero wouldn't gain as many nutrients and calories from food, and sleep wouldn't be as restful.

Ero knew that the water wouldn't make ilas headache magically disappear, since the headache was caused by divergent-human/Idolun incompatibility issues, not human/drex incompatibility issues.

Andi also knew that ero got colder now more easily than a human would, and that ero needed to sleep less often now than ero had before, though there wasn't any guarantee that that was an effect of it being part drex, rather than the fact that it was also part Idolun now.

It was only when Drew Morgan asked, "Excuse me, I'm sorry, what is happening right now?" that Andi remembered sia was even there. Ero'd started falling asleep again.

Oops.

Andi was very easily distracted when ero had nice, warm, fruit-flavored water to bask in.

Especially when it had been several stress-filled days since ero had last been able to bathe.

Thankfully, Freedom came to ilas rescue again so ero was free to continue lounging in the water as ae explained, “Mama has had a very stressful last few days, and wasn’t able to get to any water, which is very bad for ilas health.” Ryn voice grew darker, higher, threatening, “They just got back to 8301B when you broke in, so I hope you have a very good explanation for your behavior, because I don’t take kindly to people threatening my parents, or their safety.”

Uh-oh, that was coming on a little strong.

Andi resurfaced enough to protest, “Freedom, you- -”

“No!” Freedom snapped, raising ryn voice to drown ero out, “No, it’s not fair! It’s not fair! You and daddy got hurt, and duunei is tired and upset, and you only just got back, and now this one’s here, trying to kidnap everyone, and it’s just not fair! You didn’t even get to sleep yet!” Freedom was flying rapidly in circles overhead, Andi could hear the agitated movements and the echoes of specific sounds that signaled that ilas daughter was sad and angry and afraid.

This was exactly how Andi felt about the situation, but ero had been trying to avoid actually saying any of that out loud. Ero had to set a good example, keep up the semblance of normalcy for ilas kids.

“You know,” Drew Morgan’s voice interjected suddenly, “If it’s all the same to you, I can just go. Just untie me, kick me out the door, and I’ll leave. I don’t want to be here, you don’t want me to be here, I think it’d be best for everyone if you just stick me right back outside and we pretend like this never happened.”

That suggestion was too ridiculous to even contemplate, which Freedom vocalized with a derisive snort of, “Don’t be an idiot.”

Drew Morgan gasped in offense. Sia seemed to do that a lot.

Andi sank back down beneath the water until ilas head was fully submerged, muffling the sounds of the argument now raging between the two children, and decided rather abruptly that ero wasn’t in the mood to deal with this situation right now.

But, unfortunately, ero was still the adult here, so ero didn’t really have a choice. But it could take a break for a little while anyway.

Andi stayed submerged for a minute or two, relying on the filters in ilas thorax to replenish the oxygen in ilas blood, and just let danajei bask in the warm, citrusy water, pretending for just a little while that there was nothing to worry about and nothing that needed to be done.

And then ero resurfaced, determined to get this situation over and done with so that ero could bathe properly so ero wasn't actively dying, eat before ero passed out, check on the rest of ilas kids to make sure they were okay, check on Starfield to see if hea had gotten any of ler memories back yet, and then go to sleep for about a week.

“Alright, listen up.” Ero snapped, interrupting a snide comment from Drew Morgan, “I am not going to argue with you, so just tell me, right now, either why you broke into 8301B, or where I can find an adult to drop you off with, or we drop you off with the Interstellar Alliance, and they'll be in charge of finding your guardians, how does that sound?”

Not that Andi knew how to get to the Interstellar Alliance, but 8301B could probably help, and so could Starfield once hea woke up. Hopefully.

Drew Morgan seemed even angrier than before, which Andi wouldn't have thought possible. "The Interstellar Alliance? The Interstellar Alliance?!" Sia yelled, even going so far as to stamp one foot on the floor, which was a feat, considering sia was tied to a chair, "You can't take me to the Interstellar Alliance! Do you want me to be arrested? Why not just drop me off in a jail cell? That's as much as you'll be accomplishing if you leave me with those jumped up bureaucrats!"

Yep. That was starting to sound like a very nice plan.

Andi tried to remain patient, "They don't arrest children, and they aren't going to put you in a jail cell. They don't even have jail cells, or jails for that matter. I don't know which iteration you're thinking of, but it's not the one we'd be bringing you to. They have their own time travel agency, and they have an entire chapter dedicated to reuniting families through time and space. They'd be able to find your parents, or a friend, or whoever is best suited to caring for you."

"You can't—" began Drew Morgan again.

"Yes we can, and don't complain." Andi interrupted, "It could be worse, we could just bring you back to Cawfro. Though I suppose if

you're a proper Idolun you wouldn't consider that to be a bad thing."

"Alright, now I know you're mad!" Drew Morgan snapped, "You can't go to Cawfro, it's gone. Either you think I'm an idiot, or you're an even bigger idiot that I already thought you were!"

Andi resisted the urge to go back under water and just stay there for the rest of eternity. "8301B," Ero said, "Will you please ask Lera if ido would like to take over for me here? I'm not getting anywhere, and I really don't feel like arguing around in circles with a child for the rest of the night, or day, or whatever it is outside."

Then ero went back under the water so any more outbursts from Drew Morgan would be muffled.

The telegogs activated to the minimum amount, and 8301B replied, the long wall of text scrolling down Andi's field of vision slowly enough that ero could read it easily.

[[I already called eis again, ido's on eis way. I think you'll be happy to know that Starfield is awake, and coherent, though hea has lost quite a sizeable chunk of ler memories. But don't fret, I'm certain they'll return shortly, the effects of that weapon are only temporary.

[[As it is, her memories have regressed to a point several iterations back, so hea won't remember you, or Lera, or any of the children, but hea will still be able to pilot my controls until hea recovers.]]

“Is hea alright?”

[[I have explained the situation, and hea has accepted it well enough. Aside from the amnesia, there don't appear to be any negative side effects from the weapon. Her injuries healed with the healing trance, but hea is still dehydrated and malnourished, as is Lera, and you, for that matter.

[[Before anything else happens, everyone is going to sit down and eat. And then you will sleep, and then you will deal with this problem.

[[Drew Morgan can be moved to a secured room, where sia will be safe, and we don't have to worry about lia hijacking any more of my systems.

[[This is non-negotiable. Once Starfield pilots me to a safer location, you are all going to eat and sleep. We will return Drew Morgan to wherever sia came from after everyone has slept properly.]]

There was a finality conveyed even through the simple text that Andi didn't doubt, and wouldn't have argued with even if ero'd wanted to.

Ero couldn't reply while underwater except through ilas thoughts, which 8301B read easily when Andi was trying to project them. Ero was still getting the hang of telepathy.

[[You're welcome.]]

And Andi was definitely staying underwater until the food was ready.

[[I encourage it. You need a break.]]

Yes, yes ero did.

074: The Hitchhiker

Neopronouns: zig/zag/zog/(zogs)/zagself, that one/that one's/that one's own or that one's self, and ae/aeth/aether which follow the same rules as he/him, and it/its

Replace he with zig

Replace him with zag

Replace his with zog

Replace “hers” with zogs

Replace himself with zagself

Replace it with that one, or ae

Replace its with that one's or aeth

Replace itself with that one's own or aetherself

EX:

zig/zag/zog/(zogs)/zagself

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his.

He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself.”

Becomes:

"Zig is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as zig gets a fence set up around zog yard so the puppy can go outside without zag having to walk it. Zog uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting zag use, since zig lost zogs. Zig's going to buy toys and train the puppy zagself.”

that one/that one's/that one's self or own and ae/aeth/aetherself:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Ae is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ae gets a fence set up around aeth yard so the puppy can go outside without ae having to walk it. Aeth uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting ae use, since ae lost aeth. Ae's

going to buy toys and train the puppy aetherself."

"That one is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as that one gets a fence set up around that one's yard so the puppy can go outside without that one having to walk it. That one's uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting that one use, since that one lost that one's. That one's going to buy toys and train the puppy by that one's self."

074: The Hitchhiker

“Will you promise me that you’ll be careful, Aemil? I want you to promise me, seriously, that you won’t take any risks.” Grandy’s voice was serious, and their concern came through the videocall loud and clear, even if the picture itself wasn’t cooperating. Aemil could hear Grandy’s black and white zanda parrot familiar, Zanifrayd, clucking worriedly to herself in the background.

Rather than being able to see either of zog grandparent’s faces, all there was to be seen on the phone screen was blank grey, with the blue and yellow dog mascot for the videocall app sadly blinking up at zag.

Grandy’s concern was touching, but entirely misplaced. “I promise.” Zig said, grinning reassuringly just in case the video part of the call decided to start working again, “You know how I am, Grandy, I’m always careful, and you know I really am, I’m not just saying that like Brandie does.”

Grandy and Zanifrayd’s combined exasperated sighs were audible over the phone, but they held back any further comments on Brandie’s driving habits. The two of them had already had that conversation more times than could be counted.

Fortunately, just last week Brandie had voluntarily given up its driver's license, since even it admitted it wasn't safe behind the wheel anymore.

Aemil was now going to be driving cross-country to pick Brandie and Drayden up and help them move back home. They needed help packing things up and moving them to the truck, and hadn't wanted to risk the twelve hour drive.

“Did you pack blankets? Water, snacks? A phone charger and battery?” Grandy's voice came again, and Zanifrayd interjected in her higher voice, “Do you still have the hand-crank radio and candles I got you last year?”

Zog Grandparent-One had once gotten stuck on the highway in a snowstorm, and had never let anyone drive anywhere without being prepared for the worst since.

This time, Aemil let Sky, zog raccoon familiar, answer, as they hopped up onto zog shoulder, leaning down to put their mouth level with the phone's speaker: “Yes, yes, we've got them all, and I made sure to get some matches and a lighter. I'll send you a picture when we get out to the car so you can see for yourself, and I'll send you pictures every time we stop for a break. I've got the navigation set

up for the whole trip, with rest stops and gas stations already added to the list so we're not driving for too long at a time." They chattered happily to show how confident they were in their plans.

"Oh!" Aemil said suddenly, almost forgetting to ask, "Do you want any actual post cards, or souvenirs? I'm sure at least one of the rest stops will have something interesting."

"I always need more mugs! Big ones I can use for soup if they have any." came Grandy's cheerful reply.

This was immediately followed by Zanifrayd calling, "And make sure you remember to get my popcorn!"

Sky laughed, still balancing on Aemil's shoulder, "I plan to buy every bag I see, just for you!" They chirped.

"It's a crime they don't sell it here!" Grandy exclaimed, "A crime, I tell you! Well--I don't want to keep you too long, I've got to go and record Doctor Omega, it's almost time for the new episode to air! So I'll talk to you later."

Aemil didn't need to be told twice. Zig had checked and triple checked that zog DVR was going to record the new episode for zag.

It sucked that zig wouldn't be able to watch it live with zog friends like zig usually did, but sacrifices had to be made. They were going to be throwing a belated sleepover in celebration once zig got back with Brandie, who was sworn not to reveal anything on the drive over, since it would be able to watch the show tonight.

“Alright, I'll talk to you later when I get to the first rest stop, cya, Grandy!” Zig called, waving zog free hand at the camera just for the sake of it.

“Drive safe!” Grandy commanded, and then the call ended.

“Let's go!” Sky said, jumping down off zog shoulder.

Aemil packed the rest of what zig was bringing into the car, sent a picture of the emergency supplies to Grandy, and started out, putting on the first of the many old, radio plays zig'd downloaded from the Web Archive to pass the time. To actually listen to a radio play when you had ADHD, you needed to be doing something else, otherwise you'd just get bored out of your mind and stop being able to listen. Aemil and Sky had found that driving was a great time to listen.

The ominous, familiar bells of CBS' “Suspense” series tolled, and the time flew by for Aemil and zog familiar.

Zig followed the navigation's instructions, and made perfect time getting to the first rest stop where zig had decided to take a break, two hours after starting what would be the very long drive.

Zig used the restroom, Sky used the grooming station, they got hot dogs, fries, and slushies, bought the first of many mugs for Grandy, and sat for a while at a nice covered table outside to eat at a leisurely pace, heads tilted back to watch the various birds flying far overhead.

It was a little more than half an hour after zig had gotten back on the road that zig noticed the hitchhiker on the road in front of zag.

They were standing on the side of the bridge that crossed over part of the river, leaning back against the railing, a green and white baseball cap pulled down over their eyes, a black and white dufflebag on the ground at their feet. They wore a grey sweatshirt and formerly white, (now conspicuously stained with dirt at the ankles and knees) pants, and their shoulders and part of their chest were darkened with the sprinkling rain that had passed by a few minutes earlier.

Their familiar was presumably the turkey vulture perched on the same railing just a few feet away, wings spread open to catch the sun

and let the feathers dry. Either that was their familiar, or it was a very brave, or very foolish bird.

This was far away from any city or town, out in the middle of nowhere if you were going by foot. The easy half an hour Aemil'd just driven to get to this point from the rest stop would take this poor stranger almost half a day of non-stop trudging.

Zig slowed down, and let the car come to a gentle stop a few feet past the hitch-hiker so if they felt threatened, they'd see that Aemil would have to back up before zig could get to them again. Zig rolled down zog window, then leaned out the side to look back, calling invitingly, "Can I offer you a ride?"

If they were trying to get back the way Aemil'd come, zig would be more than willing to backtrack for them. There was no way zig was leaving someone out here to trek 35 miles at best without even stopping to ask if they wanted a ride. And if they were going the same way as zag, well, all the better!

The road was long and empty, so the hitch hiker approached the driver's side door without fear of being hit. The vulture stayed where they were at first, but had turned their bright pink head to watch in curiosity. Sky rolled down the passenger window to wave one little

raccoon hand at them, and called out in a friendly voice, “Heya!”. The vulture bowed their head in return, then hopped down from the railing with a noise flutter, and hop-walked over to talk to them.

By that point the hitch hiker had reached the driver’s side window, and Aemil smiled up at them, trying to appear friendly and not like a serial killer. “Need a ride?” Zig repeated the same question from before in case they hadn’t heard.

The hitch hiker glanced up the road, the way zig had been going, frowning a little below their cap. Their skin was light brown, paler than Aemil’s, and below the sunglasses they wore that reflected Aemil’s twinned face back at zag in a disconcerting way, zig couldn’t see much of their face.

“Well, I think you’re going the wrong way for me.” The hitch hiker said, sounding disappointed. “I don’t want to be a bother, but I was hoping to go that way. I’m trying to get to Port Freehaven.” They gestured back the way Aemil had come. “Thanks anyways, though.” They started to back away, like that was the end of it, but Aemil held up a hand to forestall them.

“Hey, wait, I don’t mind a little backtracking,” Zig reassured them, “It’d take you the whole rest of the day to reach the nearest gas

station, I can't let you walk that far on your own. Hop on in and at least let me give you a ride to the gas station about forty miles back – I'm not in any hurry, I mean it, I've got all the time in the world.”

Aemil had specifically given zagsself two days of leeway for the way to Brandie's old apartment, and two more on the way back, just in case anything went wrong. There was no point in planning down to the wire if a single problem would ruin everything.

This situation wasn't a problem, but it just proved that zig had been right to plan for extra time.

On the passenger side of the car, Sky seemed to have become best friends with the vulture, and the two were chatting away like they'd known each other for years. Sky tended to have that affect on people. Aemil usually had less success.

But it was apparently very hard to turn down an offer of a ride when your only alternative was walking for the next half a day, because the hitch hiker asked, clearly relieved but trying to be polite, “Are you sure you don't mind? It's not too far out of the way?”

“It's not problem at all,” Aemil assured, “Hop on in!” As the words were leaving zog mouth, Sky was already opening the passenger

door to let the vulture in.

Zig turned back in to look at the back seat to double check that nothing had suddenly gotten in the way since zig'd started the car as zig hit the button to unlock the back doors.

Fortunately, everything was organized just as zig had sorted it before zig left. Both The driver's side and center seats were clear, the passenger side had the bin of snacks on it, with the blankets, pillows, and sunshield stuffed into the footspace.

"This car came with automatic child-safety locks," Zig warned as the hitch-hiker climbed in, "So the back doors lock automatically once we start moving, but you'll be able to unlock them manually once we stop." Zig just really did not want them to think the doors locking was some ominous thing like a horror movie.

It was only after the hitch hiker shut the door, fastened their seat belt, and sat their bag on their knees that Aemil realized zig hadn't introduced zagself.

"I'm Aemil," zig said, "My pronouns are zig/zag/zog/zogs/zagself." Zig gestured towards Sky, where they were sitting with the vulture in the passenger seat like they'd been best friends forever. "And my

better half is Sky, they use they/them/their/themself.”

The vulture, sitting by the window, said happily, “I’m Calaris, my pronouns are ae/aeth/aetherself.” Ae gestured with aeth beak back towards aeth other half, “That one doesn’t have a name, and uses that one/that one’s/that one’s own pronouns.” Ae ruffled aeth wings in a way that was unmistakably happy if you’d grown up in a household with no less than three familiars who’d settled as birds. “Thank you for stopping to pick us up! I can glide for a long time on the thermals without a problem, but they’re really high up, and that one’s feet were getting tired.”

“I’m happy to help.” Aemil said, double checking again that the road was clear before zig did a U-turn to start heading back to the rest stop. “I’d want someone to stop if it was me, so it’s only fair I return the favor.”

“Hey, you want something to drink?” Sky asked invitingly while Aemil kept zog eyes on the road, “We have a cooler in the back with cold off-brand cola and water.”

“A soda would be awesome.” That one said. “Me too!” Calaris added. Sky expertly clambered into the back seat and leaned over the trunk area so they could pry open the lid of the cooler, visible in the

rear-view mirror when Aemil instinctively glanced up to make sure they didn't hurt themselves somehow.

Zig heard the clink and whir of the partly melted ice cubes being shoved around as zog familiar fished out two glass bottles of soda, then snapped the lid of the cooler shut again with a puffing click.

"Here you go!" They said. Aemil didn't check the mirror, and assumed they were handing one of the bottles to that one.

"Thanks." That one replied, proving the guess correct.

On the road ahead, recognizable more by gut feeling than anything else, Aemil was dismayed to see a dead raccoon on the side of the road. It was bad enough to see roadkill, let alone roadkill that looked like it could have been the other half of your soul.

"We've got snacks too, in the bin there." Aemil said to distract zagself as Sky climbed, three-legged, back into the front seat, holding another bottle of soda in one of their front paws. "Twizzlers, a bag of grapes, some apples, cookies, pretzels, and other stuff. Help yourself to anything you like! I made sure to bring extra to share."

"Oh, I couldn't." That one said from the back seat, "You've been too kind already, I don't want to trouble you further."

“It’s no trouble at all,” Aemil said, trying to sound as sincere as possible. Out of the corner of zog eye, zig could see that Sky had opened the bottle of soda, poured some into the pop-up bowl, and was holding it so Calaris could dip aeth beak in to drink.

“Oh, eat something won’t you? I’m starving.” Calaris said when ae’d tilted aeth head back to swallow the soda. That one just grunted wordlessly in response. Somehow the noise sounded reproachful, like that one thought that one’s familiar was being rude by accepting what zig was offering.

“Seriously, we’ve got plenty.” Zig said again, just to reinforce that zig wasn’t just trying to be polite.

Zig sent Sky a mental nudge to politely but firmly go back, pull open the snack bin, and offer that one some snacks once they were done holding the bowl for the vulture familiar. Zig got back a wordlessly amused agreement nudge in return.

For a minute or two there was quiet in the car, with the only sounds the wind going past, the tires on the pavement, and the fizzle of incarnation.

Not wanting things to get awkwardly silent, zig hovered one hand

over the play dial, and asked, “So, hey, you wanna listen to a radio play?”

“Oh, I love those!” That one said, in probably the first enthusiastic tone zig’d heard.

Smiling, Aemil pressed play, and the next audio story in the playlist began, once more tolling out the iconic, ominous bells of Suspense.

075: The Crystal Connection

Neopronouns: shade/shades/shadeself which follow the same rules as it/its/itself, along with alternating he/him and she/her pronouns.

Replace it with shade

Replace its with shades

Replace itself with shadeself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Shade is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as shade gets a fence set up around shades yard so the puppy can go outside without shade having to walk it. Shades uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting shade use, since shade lost shades. Shade's going to buy toys and train the puppy

shadeself."

075: The Crystal Connection

Cassidy Adair came back to awareness with a splitting headache, what felt like a dislocated jaw, and, something that was probably dried blood crusted on shades face.

From the pain in shades jaw, shade was going to guess the blood, if that's what it was, was shades own.

Cassidy tried to open shades eyes, but couldn't tell if shade had succeeded or not. The room, or wherever shade was, stayed the exact same shade of darkness, with the same exact glimmer of tiny swirls of static no matter if shade thought shade was opening or closing shades eyes or not.

Was it night? Was shade in a dark room? Was there something wrong with shades eyes?

Cassidy couldn't remember how shade had gotten wherever shade was, or who shade'd gotten into a fight with. Shade was...it felt like shade was lying down on some moderately soft surface, but it was surprisingly difficult to tell. There were no pins or needles, but shade was having trouble feeling any sensation from shades arms or legs.

When shade tried to move, shade couldn't. It was just like shades body weighed a million pounds, and shade wasn't strong enough to lift shades own limbs. Not even strong enough to twitch a finger.

At first, this was actually reassuring. Cassidy was familiar with sleep paralysis, shade'd had it many times, and knew it would fade on its own, either shade would wake up properly, or fall back fully asleep.

Shade waited to fall back asleep.

—Hayden Briar awoke, snapping her eyes open immediately to find himself in a bright room, feeling groggy and confused, barely able to think. It felt like his head had been filled with cottonballs. Her face felt numb, but when he raised a hand to poke it, it came away flaking with the red of what was unmistakably dried blood.

She sat up slowly, arms and leg joints aching, like he'd held them in the same position for too long, to look around.

Hayden had been lying on some sort of burnt-orange cushion in the middle of a white floor, in the center of a large room, whose six, green-blue walls stretched around him, all of them bare except for one, which held a black door that was currently shut.

For some reason, he didn't find the fact that the door was shut alarming. Maybe it was just because her head felt so fuzzy, but for some reason the closed black door seemed comforting and familiar somehow, like a fond memory from his childhood.

Hayden looked up, and could only blink in quiet, muddled, soft bewilderment. This had to be a dream, right?

The ceiling wasn't there. It was just a sea of stars overhead, crossed by some giant, confusing stripes that it took him almost a whole five minutes of staring at to realize they were planetary rings. Yellow, silver, brown, and gold rings, like a stripe across the night sky.

The alien night sky.

Hayden was clearly not on Mars anymore.

—Cassidy suddenly awoke again to find shadeself sitting up, with no memory of doing so, and still couldn't see — there was nothing but the same black, staticky void. Shades arms and legs were still numb, but seemed to be regaining some feeling — shade could lift an arm, now, and tell that shade had done so.

Carefully, shade brought shades numb hand to shades face, and accidentally smacked shadeself in the cheek with shades own hand, shades preconception thrown completely off balance by the lack of sight and sense of touch in shades hand.

More carefully this time, shade brushed shades fingertips over shades eyes, unable to think of anything else to do.

Cassidy's head still ached, but there was no fresh wave of pain that met the touch against shades eyelids, so that at least was a relief. It was probably just dark, rather than there being something horribly wrong with shades eyes. It was just dark, surely.

Shade was trying shades best not to start panicking. Trying not to jump to horrible conclusions. But it was difficult.

Shade didn't think shade was in shades bedroom; this didn't feel like shades bed. And while it was possible that Cassidy was just dreaming, shade didn't think shade was. You could sometimes dream that you were awake, and believe you were awake...but that just didn't feel like what was happening here.

Shade got up the courage to call—

—“Hello?” Hayden found herself saying suddenly.

He froze, the shock like an electric current streaking up her spine. He hadn't said anything, but her mouth had moved on its own. He lowered her gaze from the ceiling, turning his head to stare around the room warily, now really starting to get afraid.

And suddenly she remembered what had happened before he woke up in this strange, lonely room—

The blue glow on the horizon, the car chase, gravity seeming to stop, the strange voice —

And where was Cassidy? Hayden leapt to her feet, and shouted —

—“Cassidy!” Cassidy's own name burst from shades mouth all on its own, and shade suddenly found shadeself on shades feet in the pitch black shade still couldn't see through, shades heart racing with fear and shock.

Like a bolt of lightning, suddenly shade remembered what had happened before shade had found shadeself here—

Shade had been out with Hayden by the cliffs, stopping to watch the sunset after a day of fossil hunting and rock collecting. Then the

orange and pink of the setting sun had blazed a deep, eye-searing blue, and half a dozen giant, dark shapes burst into the sky, streaking straight towards them, lit on the front by the burning blue light.

They'd gotten into Hayden's car and made a break for it, but the shapes had chased them, and then there was a noise so deep it shook every one of Cassidy's bones, and the car had started lifting off the ground, and Cassidy and Hayden and everything else in the car was floating, as though gravity just didn't exist.

Then—

—Hayden staggered a step to the side, almost falling over at the sudden, sudden *something*. Cassidy still wasn't here. Where was she? “Cassidy!” he shouted, again, for the first time, she couldn't tell. Where was Cassidy? Where had the two of them been taken?

Because they had been taken! Those ships — they had to be ships — had plucked them out of the air like milkweed seeds, and floated them down through a tube and into a room, but not this one — it was smaller, with walls the same deep blue as the lights on the space ships, and then there had been these giant, orange and yellow and purple crystal spires rising from a single slab that took up most of the floor, and — what had happened? He couldn't remember. The

memory, it was there, but just out of reach. She couldn't –

Cassidy wanted to scream. They'd been abducted by aliens! Floated into the ships like they weighed nothing, then phased through some giant crystals that were filled with light, and then – and then Cassidy had awoken here, alone, unable to see, with shades body doing things shade didn't tell it to, and, very suddenly, shade had a terrible suspicion forming. A terrible, absurd idea, but no more terrible or absurd than the idea of gravity turning off and being abducted by aliens.

Shade opened shades mouth, and said, firmly –

– “Hayden, are you there?” Hayden's voice said the words by itself. But no, not by itself. Understanding dawned bright and hot. Cassidy had spoken the words that came out of Hayden's mouth, he knew it was true.

Feeling herself trembling in fear and shock, he said back –

– “Yes, Cassidy, I'm here.”

076: The Port Freehaven Mermaids

Neopronouns: fin/fins/finself, which follow the same rules as it/its/itself, and ai/ain/aire/(aires)/aiself, which follows a mix of the rules for he/him and she/her

Replace it with card

Replace its with cards

Replace itself with cardself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Fin is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as fin gets a fence set up around fins yard so the puppy can go outside without fin having to walk it. Fins uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting fin use, since fin lost fins."

Fin's going to buy toys and train the puppy finself."

and for ai/ain/aire/(aires)/aiself

Replace he or she with ai

Replace him with ain

Replace his with aire

Replace hers with aires

Replace himself with aiself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Ai is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ai gets a fence set up around aire yard so the puppy can go outside without ain having to walk it. Aire uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting ain use, since ai lost aires.

Ai's going to buy toys and train the puppy aiseif.”

076: The Port Freehaven Mermaids

The three of them were at Alex Seabreeze's house, hanging out together and grilling the fish they'd caught on their afternoon swim. This time they'd gone up the river and into the marsh for the first time, rather than out to the ocean. The whole adventure had been a learning experience, (Somehow Alex hadn't realized just how far the tide receded in enclosed spaces...) but very fun.

Alex could have easily cooked the fish himself, and of course they could have simply eaten them raw in their merran forms, but grilling made it taste even better, and it gave them all an excuse to lounge around outside. It was a nice day – hot, sunny, with big, fluffy white clouds scattered across the sky like a painting. You couldn't even see the barrier on the horizon, the sun was so bright. You could almost pretend it wasn't even there.

Aside from the fish, Alex and fins friend had put a few burgers on the grill for fins dad and his friends he was inviting over, too. Kal Seabreeze wasn't very fond of fish, and actively bemoaned the fact that so much of the meat available in Port Freehaven these days consisted of it. But there wasn't much choice in the matter. It was, after all, hard to import food from outside the city from under the barrier, and the few small livestock animals people had been keeping

within the city when the barrier was erected had to wait until the animals were old enough to slaughter. They'd just finished setting up their hand-built rabbit hutch two days ago, and were just waiting for the rabbits that were going to be their first breeding pair to be brought over once they were weaned from their respective mothers.

Alex's dad had been, to say the least, supremely dismayed by fin's new appetite, not with what fin was eating, but how much fin needed to eat. But he hadn't made any more hurtful comments on it since they'd had their heart to heart, and Alex had assured him that fin was more than capable of catching fin's own food finself – he didn't need to worry about fin going hungry, not when fin could eat things most other people couldn't. Fin knew how stressed out he was about keeping food on the table, it had been a fact of fin's life for as long as fin could remember. They'd always struggled for money, even before the barrier. He had accepted most of the changes Penumbra's radiation had wrought on his kid and fin's friends, a lot easier than some other parents had.

But he was still squeemish if he happened to walk into the kitchen right as Alex was scarfing down a whole fish at 3AM. Some people got up to get a drink of water, some people got up to eat a whole catfish. Live and let live.

Alex had agreed with him about fish being gross (mostly, the texture had been what grossed fin out), but that had been before Penumbra took over the city, and before fin'd mutated into a mermaid slash fishman slash merran slash Creature from the Black Lagoon. Which was a movie fin still hadn't seen, and at this point probably never would.

Now fin craved fish all day, every day. Fin couldn't get enough. It was just-- indescribably good. The best thing fin'd ever eaten, and fin never got tired of it. And it was even better when it was fresh, and caught with fin own hands or teeth, because then there was the thrill of the chase, the thrill of victory added to it. Everyone needed any kind of victory they could get these days, and fin was pretty sure that being able to catch fins own food (and maybe even more than that, the ability to share that same food with others whose mutations were less helpful in that regard) was one of the few things keeping fin from completely going out of fins mind.

There were after all plenty of reasons to have a mental breakdown with what had been happening for the past two years.

But back to the fish. The delicious fish that fin could catch on fins own that wasn't depressing to think about.

Sometimes when fin was out hunting, fin even ate fins catch without even surfacing if fin was hungry enough, which fin usually was. Not only was fin bigger than fin'd been before the mutation, but swimming at the speeds she, Phebe, and Hope raced at for fun (and was it even really fun? Well, no that was another depressing line of thought that fin didn't want to think about.) burnt a lot of calories, and they needed to get them back *somehow*.

It was actually a good thing that Port Freehaven's rivers and the nearby ocean had been affected by the radiation, causing just as many spontaneous mutations in the local wildlife as in the local people. At one point fish had started multiplying by budding, and had clogged an entire creek with minnows packed...well, like sardines.

Alex had eventually started trying to keep track of how many fish fin killed, to help with the local scientists who were frantically trying to catalogue all the mutations and affects, but...it was a lot. And those first few months had just been a blur of fear, hunger, rage, and overwhelming confusion, and fin'd barely been aware of what fin was doing, let alone lucid enough to count how many fish and what kind fin had been catching.

Now, though, Alex tried to do better. The mutation rate made it

difficult to say for sure what species each fish had started out as, if it was even possible to guess, so fin and the other “things from the swamp” had gotten together with Kelsey, the person most interested in cataloging the fish mutations, and they had had them pick categories that they could sort any fish they saw into by memory. Some of the categories included things like Person Sized Fish, Car Sized Fish, Fish with Two Heads, Fish With Light-up Scales, Tiny Fish, Snake-like Fish, Fish that Tasted Like Beef, Fish that Tasted Like Fruit, red fish, blue fish, green fish, and other things like that.

Every day they'd each make sure to bring back at least one, but preferably more, of the same “species” (which didn't seem like the right word any more, but none of them could figure out a better option) they were eating, for Kelsey to study in detail. When the waters were calm enough to take a boat out, Kelsey would actually come with them, and they'd pass smaller ones up to throw in a quick tank on the deck for them to look at while they were still alive.

So far there had only been one close call where the tank almost shattered because the little hand-sized fish they'd put in there immediately started rapidly growing to the size of a person. Alex had had to jump out of the water to grab it and throw it back into the ocean. The glass on the sides of the tank had gotten thousands of tiny lines carved into it from where the fish's suddenly sharp scales had

gouged it as it was yanked frantically out. Alex had ended up accidentally throwing it straight into Phebe's face in fins haste to get it off the boat. Ai still had a scar from it on aire forehead, which Alex still felt guilty about even though Phebe insisted ai thought it was funny.

No matter how many fish they caught, it never seemed to make a dent. Which was good for them, and everyone else who ate the fish.

There were four of them now that Lyra had mutated down the same branch. Apparently, once the mutations found a "successful" form, they were more likely to go that way in the future. Alex had been the first person to mutate into a "mermaid" (fin didn't even have a tail all the time, so it was a little misleading even if you thought of it as gender neutral). Phebe had been a close second. Hope had come next, then then Nakir, and Lyra, so far, was the fifthth.

And, something about that thought felt...wrong.

Sometimes fin wondered whether letting Lyra become a mermaid – hell, even letting Nakir become a mermaid – had been the right choice. Fin could have avoided them like the literal plague, made sure their mutations had gone down a different branch by not letting them absorb anything from fin.

But...

Something had always felt wrong. It felt like something was off. Something was out of balance. It had seemed right to let more merrans be mutated into existence.

Hope helped, and so did Nakir, and so did Lyra, but it didn't...

...Alex could just never shake the feeling that something was wrong. And fin'd talked to Phebe about it, and ai felt the same way. And so did Hope.

But Nakir and Lyra didn't notice a thing when they brought it up. They didn't feel the same sense of aching loss that haunted Alex's every waking moment. They didn't feel a jolt of surprise and disappointment every time fun surfaced and looked around to find—

- To find what?

Fin didn't know.

Something was wrong, and fin didn't know how, or why, or what fin was looking for, what fin wasn't finding, or why the idea of having two, three, four, five merrans felt viscerally wrong.

Something was wrong and Alex just couldn't figure out what. No matter how long fin wracked fins brain, no matter how many times fin stared at fins pack and counted over and over and over again, always coming up with the same numbers, always coming up with the wrong numbers.

Something was wrong. Something had always been wrong.

Fin just could never figure out what.

But it was a perfect day. The sun was shining. The fish were...not biting, but being bitten. The smells coming from the grill were heavenly, fin was with fins friends, and they were having fun. Soon the adorable baby bunnies would be delivered and fins dad would be able to look forward to having food he actually enjoyed eating.

Fin had just stood up to race Phebe to the fridge to grab more sodas, and then suddenly, before fin knew what was happening or had time to react, someone's arms were wrapping around fin from behind, pulling fin and Phebe into a tight hug.

Fin jumped in surprise, then squirmed, laughing. "Lyra!" Fin exclaimed, smushed into Phebe's shoulder awkwardly so fin couldn't turn around to glare at pan, "You scared me!"

Phebe's stuttered, "Uuuhmmmm," was fin's first clue that something was wrong. Fin felt the crystal in fin's mind that represented Phebe pulse with confusion and alarm.

Lyra's crystal was still distant and pale.

It wasn't Lyra hugging them.

Fin's heart rate spiked immediately, and fin shoved against the arm restraining fin, digging fin's nails into the flesh when the person didn't let go immediately. There was a sharp intake of breath from behind fin, the arm loosened, and fin broke free, grabbing Phebe to pull her away from whoever the hell it was.

Alex spun around furiously, and found herself staring at an unfamiliar person who had skin that was currently badly sunburned, and extremely long, bright blonde hair, like the kind you only get out of a bottle of dye. It didn't match their brown eyebrows, or the much darker roots growing out. They looked about the same age as fin and the rest of fin's friends – probably another highschooler.

"Uh, excuse me," Fin snapped, seeing Hope out of the corner of fin's eye coming up to stand next to them, "Who are you? And what are you doing at my house? And why the hell did you just hug me?" Fin

had to resist the urge to clench fins hands. Fin had a very large personal space bubble, and the only ones allowed to touch fin were fins friends. Not random strangers trespassing on fins house.

For a few seconds the stranger just stared, their gaze darting feverishly from Alex's to Phebe's and back and forth. Their mouth was half open, half smiling, like they'd forgotten to change their expression.

But as the seconds passed, and the stranger apparently failed to find what they were looking for in their expressions, the smile dropped from their face, and sharp, clear horror replaced it.

“No, no,” They whispered, taking a step towards them, one hand held out, and desperation was in every line of the strange body and voice, “No, you have to remember me! You have to know who I am! Come on! Phebe! Alex! It's me! You know me! Tell me you know who I am! It's me! We-- ”

And then their eyes darted to look at Hope, and they froze, snapping their mouth shut, fear darting across their expression.

They lowered their hand.

The tension that had been building in the air faded by half a fraction. Alex was still resisting the urge to transform into fins landhunter form, the memories of the fight at the Delta making fin both anxious and enraged.

The stranger seemed to finally sense the danger they were in, because they wisely backed away, their expression shocked and afraid.

They shook their head, tears visibly springing to their eyes, which Alex suddenly noticed were a searing, acid yellow. “You have to know me,” They whispered at them, like somehow it would make them not be a stranger, “Please, I can’t lose you too-- ” And then they suddenly sobbed, like they couldn’t help it, and raised their hands to cover their mouth.

And Alex noticed for the first time...how...

...dirty they were. Like, really dirty, not just “spent the day in the garden” dirty.

Their clothes – denim overalls with worn-through knees, cut off raggedly halfway down the calf, over a pink and blue flower print Tshirt – had obviously not been washed in a while, because they

were covered in layers of dirt and sweat stains and what was absolutely dried blood, and there was dirt caked under their nails and sand in their hair and pretty much...everywhere.

They were covered in sunburn, there was a raw scrape on their left elbow, the way they were standing you could tell how exhausted they were, and their wrists—

Their wrists—

Were covered in roping, raw wounds.

The defensive tension that had built up around Alex and his friends turned very abruptly into concern as, all at once, they all seemed to notice the same thing. The same very clear sign of abuse.

Hope stepped forward almost immediately, her hands held up in a gesture for peace. “Hey,” She said softly, hovering her hands over the stranger’s shoulder, not quite touching, but still offering comfort, “It’s okay, um, do you want to sit down? Let me-- I’ll get you a glass of water, you look like you could use it.”

“Yeah, yeah, come and sit down, relax a little.” Phebe pulled away from Alex’s side and hurried to carry one of the lawn chairs over,

aire eyes wide behind aire narrow glasses.

Alex watched as the stranger turned towards Hope in a way that seemed like they were giving something up, accepting the comfort she was offering even while they continued to cry, gasping in hiccuping breaths.

Alex just watched, unsure how to react. Hope was already comforting them and Phebe was already getting them a chair, what was there left to do?

Hope offered the stranger one of their hands, and the stranger grabbed at it like it was a lifeline, and clung to it with unconcealed desperation as Hope slowly and gently lead them backwards into the chair Phebe had carried over.

When the back of their legs hit it, they sank into it like a puppet whose string had been cut, still clutching at Hope's hand with one of their own, even though it now meant that Hope had to crouch down next to the chair to avoid leaning over awkwardly.

Hope grimaced, but didn't pull her hand out of the stranger's grip. Instead, she just patted the stranger's hand with her free one, and said, "Hey, you never told us your name; my name's Hope, my

pronouns are she/her, and I guess you already know Phebe and Alex, but what's your name? What are your pronouns?"

Instead of answering, the stranger finally let go of Hope's hand, and pressed their own hand to their forehead, closing her their in what was obviously pain. "Thanks," they muttered, blatantly not answering either question.

"Uh, yeah," Hope said, confused and concerned, "No-- no problem? I'll just—" She glanced at Alex as though for help, but Alex had none to offer. "I'll go get you that water, then." She said awkwardly.

She stood, glanced at Alex again, then jogged into the house, surreptitiously wiping her hand on her leg as she went.

Alex knew that crawling sensation very well, unfortunately. Any touch from anyone that wasn't part of the pack set it off, and it was one of the worst things about being a merran. It was like getting shocked every time you touched someone, except the shock didn't just last an instant. It stuck around, like you were covered in bugs.

And if you kept the physical contact up for long enough, the creepy crawly sensation started to actually sting, like someone poking you sharply with their fingernail, or pinching you. And then if you still

didn't get away it would really start to hurt.

For some reason, Alex didn't have that feeling right then. Not on fins hands or arms from where fins skin had come into contact with the stranger's. It was why fin'd just immediately assumed it was Lyra hugging fin, even though that was completely out of character for him. Even before he'd become a mermaid, he'd hated being touched.

Fin'd never seen this stranger before in fins life. But...

The more Alex looked, the more fin saw. Like the fact that the stranger was barefoot, and their legs, as sunburned as the rest of them, were covered in scratches and cuts, none of them as bad as the welts around their wrists, but everything just kept adding up to a worse and worse picture.

Just what in the world had happened to this person?

Did Alex even want to know?

Fin and Phebe shared a glance over the stranger's head before Phebe went and headed inside to join Hope in the house, their mental-crystals shifting and converging at the edges of fins senses, the colors fin didn't really see shifting and swarming as they whispered

frantically.

There were so many horrible ideas spinning around Alex's head fin couldn't even keep track of them.

They still had an hour or so before fins dad was supposed to get home with his friends and the rabbits. Hope and Phebe were arguing about whether or not to call him, or an ambulance, or the guard, or their parents, or just.....no one. If they didn't know what had happened, who could they call for help?

But they needed to do something. This person was in pain.

Alex glanced up at the sky, where the sun was beating down mercilessly, not a cloud in sight. So bright the barrier couldn't be seen.

Slowing fins breathing so fin could get a sense of the air flow, Alex carefully focused the surge of magic rising in fins chest through the smallest, tiniest, *most precise* movement of fins fingers in towards fins palm—

And watched as the clouds slowly-- almost casually-- expanded out across the sky from nowhere, blossoming here or there and crawling

towards the sun oh so slowly, so that no one would think twice -- until the harsh glare of heat was smothered in gentle grey-white.

The temperature immediately dropped, the weight of the sun disappeared from fins shoulders and head, and the stranger breathed a sigh of relief that they didn't even try to hide.

“Thanks, Alex.” They said, and Alex’s heart froze in fins chest.

It was like a bucket of ice water had been dumped over fins head.

No one besides Phebe knew Alex had magic, not even the rest of fins pack, and not even fins dad!

Fin couldn’t help but stare at the stranger, who hadn’t lifted their gaze from the ground where they’d been looking since they sat down.

“Who--” Alex started to demand, then forcibly reigned in fins fear and tried to ask in a gentler, more restrained voice, “Who are you? How do you know my name?” Fin didn’t even want to risk asking how they knew about fins magic out loud.

The stranger lifted their yellow-eyed gaze to look back at fin, and said, with a voice that sounded like it was weighed down by the

entire ocean, “You wouldn’t remember me even if I told you.”

077: Jenny Every...Who?

Neopronouns: rat/rats/ratself which follow the same rules as

Replace it with rat

Replace its with rats

Replace itself with ratself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Rat is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as rat gets a fence set up around rats yard so the puppy can go outside without rat having to walk it. Rats uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting rat use, since rat lost rats. Rat's going to buy toys and train the puppy ratself."

077: Jenny Every...Who?

When Lhakhovi Skizum woke up and found ratself in a room with glowing white walls and ceiling and a jet black floor, rat assumed rat was dreaming. It was the logical conclusion for the circumstances, considering the last thing rat remembered was going to bed at 4am from reading on rats phone.

The dream hypothesis was further confirmed when rat found a mirror on one of the walls, and when rat looked in, it wasn't rat looking back out. The face looking back was completely unfamiliar. For one thing, it wasn't a human face. Rather than round human ears, there were large, pointed, fluffy ears on the sides of rats head like in a fantasy game. And the weirdest thing about them was that the insides were bright blue.

The eyes at least were the same, the only familiar thing on an alien face; a brown so dark they almost seemed black unless you looked very closely.

The hair was straight and cut short, and capped by a pair of metal-rimmed goggles, and brown rather than black. The skin was also a much lighter shade of brown than rats. Rat couldn't see the mouth on this strange face, because rat was wearing a cloth facemask, and

didn't feel any particular compulsion to pull it down.

Skizum found that rat was wearing an overly large red scarf, a dark, very heavy and warm leather jacket with fur on the collar, wrist cuffs, and waist, and long, thick dark blue pants that seemed to be lined with fleece.

The warm clothes were apparently warranted, because the exposed skin on rats hands and around rats eyes was chilled with the cold air that seemed to pervade the room. Rat looked down to see large, heavy leather boots with a strange design. Rat couldn't immediately put a finger on why the design seemed strange, until rat realized that they were way too short on the front – how were feet supposed to fit into them?

But like with the mask, rat felt no burning desire to take them off to see how it worked. Like a dream, rat felt that these things were, if curious, not really worth getting worked up about. Skizum was interested, yes, but also calm in the sort of way that only comes in dreams.

Rat turned to look around the room, and saw a dark, open doorway on the far side that hadn't been there before. Faint, energetic music was coming from somewhere on the other side.

Rat started towards it, figuring that whatever the plot of the dream would be, it would probably be more interesting out there.

As Skizum was just starting to step through the doorway, a sudden sign appeared, floating in the air in front of rat, just at eye level, and at the right distance to be easily read. It was glowing white like the walls, which should have hurt the eyes, but somehow didn't, because of the strange logic of dreams.

Written on this sign in what looked like swirling, cursive handwriting that somehow managed to have tons of loops and swirls while still being perfectly legible, were the words, written in deep pitch black flecked with stars:

“The character of Jenny Everywhere is available for use by anyone, with only one condition. This paragraph must be included in any publication involving Jenny Everywhere, in order that others may use this property as they wish. All rights reversed.”

Skizum read it again automatically, admiring the sure strokes of...star-ink? After the third time rat read it, the sign slowly faded away into thin air, leaving rat saying aloud to ratself, “Well, I guess I have more evidence for Rem that it's a myth that you can't read in dreams now...”

Rat thought about the words rat had read, and was both surprised and pleased that rat could remember them clearly. Usually, when rat read something in a dream, the words were hard to remember afterward, and seemed to get jumbled in rats mind the more rat tried to remember them. But sometimes, like this time, rat could remember them clearly. Rem didn't really believe rat when rat told her rat could do this, but she'd at least have to admit rat was creative, if nothing else, when rat woke up and told her about this dream.

Rat would make sure to write the words down as soon as rat woke up, so she wouldn't be able to say rat had planned it out ahead of time.

For a few moments, or maybe minutes, Skizum pondered the idea of forcing ratself to wake up to write the words down now. But after thinking about it, rat decided not to risk it – rat could still remember all the words perfectly, rat was sure rat would remember when rat eventually woke up naturally. But if rat woke ratself up now, rat might not be able to come back to this dream again, and it was interesting so far. Rat wanted to see what would happen next.

So Skizum continued on through the doorway, and immediately found ratself in an apparently completely endless hallway extending off to the left and right, with more black doors lining every space of

the wall, separated only by the grey doorframes.

Despite what could and maybe should have been a frightening situation, Skizum wasn't afraid. Rat was merely curious and calm, ready to explore, but in a sort of sleepy, pleasant way. There was no rush, the dream seemed to silently say, stay as long as you like. Join the party if you want.

The music Skizum had heard earlier was coming from a black doorway a few doors down on rats right, and on the opposite wall. Above this door were glowing blue neon letters that said "loud room", with red letters below them reading, "quiet room", with an arrow pointing further to the right. Rat glanced in that direction, and much further down the hall, somehow managed to see the door with the opposite labels. Since the loud room was closer and Skizum didn't mind high volumes, rat made rats way over, and with the casual bravery unique to dreams you knew you were dreaming, stepped through without hesitation.

It was another room like the one rat had found ratself in, but in this one, the walls weren't blank glowing white, they swirled with colors in ribbony wisps, pulsing and twisting in time to the fast-paced, electronic music that seemed to be coming from a band on the far wall across the room, where four people, each with the same short,

dark hair, brown skin, and red scarves were playing on an electric keyboard, what looked like a regular laptop, and some instrument rat didn't recognize.

Between the band and Skizum was a crowd of dozens of people, all with the same general features, but with different styles of clothing, heights, and weights. Many had red scarves, but others had blue, green, brown, or black. One person had a yellow one, another had a pink. Some had glasses, most didn't. Some were using crutches or canes, and three were in wheelchairs, with another two using rollators.

A few were different species – there was a cat person, a dog person, a fox person, a rhino person, a monkey person, a bird person, and even stranger things, like the fantasy creature Skizum appeared to be at the moment. Now that Skizum was looking at others like rats current form, rat realized for the first time that rat had a tail, brown and covered with long, fine hairs like a horse tail. It had just felt so natural and normal that rat hadn't noticed it until now.

This dream was so weird, but so interesting.

Some of the people – clones? -- were dancing in the middle of the floor, others were grouped off to the sides, where tables lined the

walls covered in various foods, with yellow plastic cups for drinks, talking animatedly.

One of them closer to the door saw Skizum, and did a doubletake so abrupt they dropped their cup. But another one near them somehow managed to instantly catch it before it could hit the ground. “Woah!” The first one cried. The one who’d caught the fallen cup looked at rat, and also exclaimed, “Woah!”

Interested in what they were so excited about, Skizum went over to greet them, lifting a hand in a wave, and saying, “Hi.” when rat was close enough.

The two stared at rat for probably two seconds, eyes wide. These two were identical as far as Skizum could tell. Both with brown scarves, the same black shirt and pants. Even the same little green bracelet on their left hands.

Remembering what the sign rat had read, Skizum asked curiously, “So, are you Jenny Everywhere?”

“Yes,” the two chorused at the exact same time, along with half a dozen others behind them who had turned to follow the conversation. Five others answered, also simultaneously, “No.”

Then, with all of them at the same time, the many who were paying attention to the conversation asked, “Who are you?”

“Lhakhovi Skizum.” Skizum replied, and, just to be polite, even though it was just a dream, “My pronouns are rat/rats/ratself. What are yours?”

Some of them answered, “she/her/hers/herself.”, while others, including many of those who’d answered no to the question of were they Jenny Everywhere, replied various things, not all at once, though. The people who shared the same pronouns spoke at the same time, but each group who used the same pronouns waited until there was space to talk, with perfect timing.

“He/him/his/himself.” said some, “they/them/their/themself.” said others. “Ze/hir/hirs/hirself.” said a couple, “It/its/itself.” said a few. “Xey/xem/xyr/xemself.” said one, and another, “bun/buns/bunself”, and at last, “I use any pronouns except she/her.”

If this weren’t such a casual, calm, soothing dream, Skizum would have been worried about telling them all apart and matching pronouns to who when many of them seemed near-identical, but somehow rat knew that rat would be waking up before rat would be given any opportunity to accidentally misgender anyone.

“How did you get here?” this time it seemed like the whole room had turned to ask the question. Even the band had stopped playing.

Rat shrugged. “I went to bed.”

Only a few spoke this time. “Did you do anything special before you fell asleep?”

Rat shrugged with only one arm this time, just for some variety.

“Well, I was reading Grimm’s Fairy Tales on my phone.” Rat said thoughtfully, “I assume that’s where my brain got these weird ideas, though nothing like this was in there so far.”

Rat had only just gotten to the end of the story about the kid who refused to take good advice from a fox.

“Well...” one person started to say. This person had the same fantasy-creature ears and tail as Skizum, almost identical to the face rat’d seen in the mirror, except for the insides of this person’s ears being bright green instead of blue. They continued, not unkindly, “Could you please wake up? You’ve somehow taken Sinéad’s place...If it helps, I promise I’ll come visit you when it’s a reasonable hour in your time zone, and I’ll explain everything from our side.”

Well, Skizum had never been asked to wake up by characters in a dream before, let alone asked so politely. It seemed like it would be a shame to say no. And besides, this way rat could write down those words from before – rat still remembered perfectly.

“Alright, that sounds fair.” Rat said, thinking it was a very funny ending to a dream. And with a few moments of thoughtful effort, rat woke ratself up, and the regular cool darkness of rats ceiling met rats gaze. A glance and fumble over for rats phone showed it was 5am.

On the notepad app, Skizum wrote down the short paragraph rat’d read, having to close one eye to bring the phone into focus at such a short distance. The app would mark the time this note was created, and it would serve as rats smug evidence to Rem that it was, in fact, possible to read in dreams.

Then rat went back to sleep, falling easily into a new, much less interesting, much less concrete dream about a baby pig that used a giant pinecone for armour...

And Skizum would have thought nothing more of the dream outside of rats continual debate with Rem, except that at 11AM the next morning, as rat was in the kitchen pouring a bowl of cereal, the doorbell rang, and, when rat went to answer, found one of the

characters from rats dream last night standing there, in the daylight, in what was most certainly not a dream.

“Hi, Lhakhovi Skizum,” The creature straight out of a fantasy novel said cheerfully, proffering a giant basket of fruit and muffins, “I’m Jenni Everywhere!”

078: Guardian Star

Neopronouns: kal/vir/vil/(val)/kalixir which follow mixed rules:
he/him/his/hers/himself

Replace he with kal

Replace him with vir

Replace his with vil

Replace hers with val

Replace himself with kalixir

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Kal is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as kal gets a fence set up around vil yard so the puppy can go outside without vir having to walk it. Vil uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting vir use, since kal lost val. Kal's going to buy toys and train the puppy kalixir."

078: Guardian Star

The guardian star looked down on the castle of vil charge's enemy, waiting anxiously for the princess to reemerge. Kal always hated it when she went inside wards kal was forbidden to look past. There was no way of knowing what was happening to her, and with this castle, none of vil linemates could see through the ward either.

The lord of this castle wanted to blot all the stars out of the sky forever, and had ensured that his plots were kept out of their awareness, almost purely out of spite.

Even if they'd known what he was planning, they wouldn't have been able to stop him. They were powerless to communicate with their charges, not until another seer was born, and that wouldn't be for another thousand years yet.

All Strelitz could do was wait, and hope, and keep watch on the dark fields and dour stone walls, the moat a black line speckled with lapping reflections.

It had been over two hours since Stretliz's charge had snuck into the castle, and even how she did it, kal didn't know. Through some form of magic that, like the castle itself, the guardian stars could not

understand or witness.

Kal wished the princess knew how much kal wanted to know she was safe. She hadn't used obscure magic to hide herself from vir, but it almost felt that way.

Kal didn't know how long kal waited in tense anxiety before something finally happened. The servant's door quietly slipped open, letting a draft of warm candlelight peirce the darkness for a few scant moments, and a familiar green cloak that made Strelitz's heart leap with joy, swept out and shut the door again just as quickly. She was alive! She was escaping!

Kal watched, hope burning, as the princess slowly, casually began to walk down the well-trodden path that the servants of the castle took to and from the local farm. Once she got past the farm and into the woods, kal knew, she would be able to hide herself and get back to the resistance camp safely. She only had to get past the farm.

For a few long minutes, it seemed that she would escape safely, with no one the wiser of her being there.

But then there came a sudden scuffle along one of the ramparts of the castle, where the wards didn't block Stretlitz's sight of those on

the roof, and kal realized with horror that vil charge had been discovered as a spy. Orders were being thrown from voice to ear, demanding the gunners take aim.

There was nothing kal could do to stop them, and no way for vir to warn vil charge. She was still walking calmly down the path like she belonged on it, like she had no idea anything was wrong.

The first shot was fired. What kind of weapon it was, Strelitz couldn't guess. It wasn't any kind kal had ever seen before. The projectile was dark, reflecting no light, and moving too fast for kal to make heads or tails of. Aimed right where vil charge would be by the time it hit her, with perfect accuracy.

Strelitz could only watch, desperately praying to the center that she would realize the danger in time to protect herself. All of vil linemates felt vil anxiety and shared it, sending out their own prayers for vil charge's protection.

The center must have listened, because right when kal was about to give up hope, prepared to see vil charge cut down before she could even reach adulthood-- something warned her of the danger she was in, and within a heartbeat she had spun, throwing the green cloak aside so she could unfold her metal wings and use them to deflect

the projectile harmlessly into the ground as though she'd done this a thousand times, though Strelitz knew with a pounding heart that the success of the sudden, desperate maneuver had been sheer dumb luck.

But another one was already heading towards her, and another behind that. Kal knew the princess wouldn't be able to deflect another hit without shattering her wing. Her only hope left was to fly.

Fortunately, she came to the same conclusion almost at the same instance Strelitz did, because she dove to the side, then threw herself into the air, her blue-green metal wings flashing in the starlight as she strove for height, then just as quickly sped off towards the cover of the trees as the baffled gunners found themselves suddenly faced with a target that could go up rather than just side to side or forward or backward.

It took those on the castle roof too long to even stop to think about adjusting the height of the heavy guns, and by the time the lead began swearing in frustration and amazement at the failure, the princess, Strelitz' beloved charge, was safely hidden from them among the trees, but where Strelitz's light could still find her.

Kal sighed with relief, and watched over her as she flew home.

079: The Theft of the Synphirim

Neopronouns: rhi/rhim/rhir/rhimself which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with rhi

Replace him with rhim

Replace his with rhir

Replace himself with rhimself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Rhi is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as rhi gets a fence set up around rhir yard so the puppy can go outside without rhim having to walk it. Rhir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting rhim use, since rhi lost rhir. Rhi's going to buy toys and train the puppy rhimself."

079: The Theft of the Synphirim

“So, do you all want to meet up here again in three hours for pasta? I’ve got the receipt right here.” The rick waved the small piece of paper they’d just printed out of their sky blue wristcomp through the air, letting the large and clear print at the top be clearly read as “Receipt of Payment for Scheduled Delivery of 4x Bowl of Bergir’s Best Pasta”, with a string of coordinates that rhi knew matched their present location at the south-western curve of Lorefish Lake.

It was very, very tempting for rhim to say yes to the free food without hesitation, but rhi forced rhimself to visibly hesitate, and mentally take a few seconds to actually think about the offer.

This rick had come out of nowhere, quite literally dropped out of the sky into the little hideaway where they’d been fishing, thrown brand new clothes at them, and money, and a large pizza, and now they were offering more food if they came back in three hours? Or rather, since rhi and rhir friends had been planning to spend the whole day here anyways, if they stayed here and waited for the rick to come back.

Rhi looked over at Kamiica and Niiyaz to see what they were thinking.

Kamiica sent privately to their group, [Do you think it could be a trap?]

Niiyaz sent, [If they wanted to call the guards, why wouldn't they just do it now? Why give us all this free stuff just to hand us over later? It's not like we're especially hidden right now anyways. Tons of people saw us walk over here. I mean, I guess it could be an elaborate set up...]

[I vote yes.] Rhi sent, [I want that pasta.]

There was a moment or two of pause, then Niiyaz and Kamiica both sent, [Me too.] Apparently all three of them were trying to be cautious against their own wills.

Rhi would have liked to say that when they all three turned to the rick to say, at exactly the same time, "Sounds good to me", that it was on purpose, but it was really just a side-effect of being mirrim-bonded for so long.

The rick grinned, and stood, holding out the receipt to rhim, since rhi was sitting closest. Rhi took it, and shoved it into rhir pocket where the pouch of pennies they'd given rhim earlier had also gone. Rhi would look at it once they were gone. Somehow it felt embarrassing

to double-check the receipt while the rick was still standing there watching.

“Great!” The rick said cheerfully, like they were all best friends, “You hold onto that one, I’ll make my own copy for the delivery drone. I’ll see you all in three hours – right now, I gotta go figure out how to give a Synphirim a bath!”

That had to be some kind of weird turn of phrase for rich people for when they were busy doing rich people stuff.

Rhi watched as the rick turned to the short wall of dirt that hid this fishing spot from the road, and high-jumped to the top without even getting a running start, then turned to wave cheerfully back down at rhim and rhir friends. Absolutely showing off their high athletics skill, which had been locked behind a paywall for over a decade now once the ricks took over all the training centers and starting charging an absurd toll for even just wanting to look around.

Then, as the three watched in suddenly dumbfounded shock, the rick turned around, pulled a golden summoning crystal out of their pocket, held it up, said something that the universe itself kept them all from hearing, and out of the air shimmered a massive white and gold beast the likeness of which they’d only ever seen on the royal

crest.

But this wasn't a simple, stylized heraldic symbol – this was the real thing, in the flesh, standing less than ten squares' distance. This was a synphirim, no – The Synphirim, it was the only one of its kind -- the largest beast ever discovered on land, the only beast that was truly classed as a dragon. The rarest and most endangered beast in all the world.

It stood two heads taller than the rick even on all fours, and was so big the only parts of it rhi could see were its front legs and shoulders – the rest of its body was blocked by the trees and bushes, and probably blocked half the road up there. Its shimmering hide was white traced with rainbow veins like a microchip, with gold bands on its legs and long, rabbit-like ears.

Its face was long and pointed like a wolf's, with two pitch black eyes that regarded the three beggars staring up at it with a calm regard, seeming almost amused by their amazement.

It seemed like the rick was giving them all time to properly stare and be amazed, before they waved again, and with an ease that was just purely showing off, they leapt up, and did a front flip in midair to land perfectly seated in the saddle strapped to the dragon's back.

“Meet me here again in three hours for dinner!” They called, and then gave a silent signal to the shimmering synthetic beast so that it all of a sudden leapt forward and into the air, and the downdraft from its ragged-edged wings actually knocked the three beggars back onto their butts.

A few moments later, the pair were nothing more than a quickly diminishing dot in the sky, headed out over the town.

There were a few moments of stunned silence, and then Rhi sent,
[Oh. My. Gods.]

[Oh my farbly gods] Niiyaz sent with emphasis.

[Do you realize what this means?] Kamiica sent.

Oh yes. Rhi knew what it meant.

There was only one Synphirim in existence, because the first person to hatch one, the now infamous Kreig Scandon, had bought and trashed all the other eggs before anyone knew what he was doing, and then refused to allow his, the only survivor, to be cloned or bred. He was the richest person in the kingdom, and kept The Synphirim’s summoning crystal locked up inside his mansion under lock and key,

with all his other beasts and half a dozen soulmates guarding it.

And just two days ago, someone had broken into his mansion and stolen The Synphirim's crystal, along with almost all of Scandon's fortune in gold, and who knew how many other collectible items so rare they were practically priceless.

Which meant that rick hadn't actually been a random slummer.

And that meant...

Not even bothering to get up off the ground, rhi felt rhir pocket for the pouch of coins the – not the rick, they had to have been the Master Thief themselves – had thrown rhim. It had felt so light rhi had assumed it was just pennies, barely worth the weight they took up. With the economy the way it had been for the past few years, they couldn't be used for anything. But ricks liked to throw them around as a 'favor' to pitiful little beggars like rhim.

But if that had been the Master Thief...

Hardly daring to breathe, rhi pulled the pouch of coins out of rhir pocket, and loosened the drawstring to look inside.

And it wasn't pennies that filled the bag.

It wasn't even gold coins.

It was diamond.

Hundreds of them, at least. Enough to buy all the houses on the market, enough to buy more clothes than any of them could ever wear to rags. Enough to buy them probably all the scavenging, pillaging, and farming beasts they could ever want, combined, three times over, on top of all of those houses and clothes. They could probably even buy a whole castle with just this bag and still have some left over.

Rhi could probably even buy a knockout cure if rhi felt like throwing all the money away at once, just for the value of knowing that someone, somewhere, would be having a complete catastrophic nuclear meltdown over the fact that someone had actually bought their knockout cure on the open market. It would probably be the only thing in the news for at least two weeks, if the news wasn't currently flooded with the theft of The Synphirim.

Rhi put rhir head in rhir hands, completely speechless. Like someone had cast a silencing spell on rhim.

Niiyaz had no such trouble, and once she saw what was in the coin

purses, he started shouting and swearing up a storm loud enough for all of them, which was definitely going to scare all the fish away.

But who needed to eat minnows when you had all the money in the world? And in just three hours the Master Thief would come back, probably with more money and gifts and food...

...It was a good day to be a dirty beggar.

080: Knowing When to Run

Neopronouns: zim/zur/zimself which follow the same rules as it/its/itself

Neopronouns: card/cards, which will follow the same rules as it/its/itself for this example.

Replace it with zim

Replace its with zur

Replace itself with zimself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Zim is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as zim gets a fence set up around zur yard so the puppy can go outside without

zim having to walk it. Zur uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting zim use, since zim lost zur. Zim's going to buy toys and train the puppy zimself."

080: Knowing When To Run

Swift was on zur perch, and zim and Gellert had been speaking – softly, so as not to wake the child – of the weather from the past few days. It hadn't rained in what seemed like forever, even though it was due.

Swift was on zur perch by the doorway, Gellert lay on his side on his rug by the cradle, his gray fur burnished by the slight coming in through the window that looked out over the gardens.

They had just started to wonder aloud together about when they would be able to go on another hunt with their lord, when suddenly Gellert twitched his head, then sat bolt upright, staring at the window, the fur on his back stiffening. Zim could hear a growl starting in his chest.

Swift asked in alarm, “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Gellert wasn't excitable and prone to overreaction, and Zim had learned to trust in the noses of dogs. They could sense things zim would never be able to dream of.

But before Gellert could respond, Swift was given the answer when

a shadow suddenly blotted out the bright sunlight, and a large shape, even larger than Gellert, came through the window.

Swift didn't need to ask again what had alarmed Gellert so much. Now zim knew – it was a wolf.

How had they gotten past the castle's remaining human guards, and all the other animals still roaming the place? But that didn't matter now – because the wolf was here, in the nursery, with only Swift and Gellert to protect the prince's infant son, asleep in his cradle.

Swift was not tied to zur perch – zim hadn't needed to be since zim was a fledgeling – so zim could go on the attack if need be, but it would be more dangerous than anything zim had ever done before.

Gellert was on his feet now, and boomed, "Get out!"

The wolf, who had slunk to the corner by the window to regard the two of them with cautious yellow eyes, said nothing, but darted those bright eyes from Gellert, to the cradle, to Swift, to the doorway, and back to the window.

Finally its gaze settled back on Gellert, and it lifted itself out of the half-crouch it had fallen into, and took a solid, purposeful step

forward. Toward the cradle and the sleeping child.

Gellert snarled, and barked again in a fury, “Stay back! I’m warning you!”

In the cradle, the prince’s son woke up and began to whimper.

Swift decided to try and help by adding a screech of zur own, hoping to attract more attention – “Wolf! Wolf!” zim called as loudly as zim could. The child in the cradle began to cry in earnest, adding his wails to the cacophony of echoes. “Wolf! Guards! Wolf!”

But no one came. Most of the humans had gone to the tournament several kingdoms away, and had left behind only enough servants and guards to keep the place clean. Those servants who had been meant to be watching the child had snuck off to the tournament a few hours after the nobles left so as not to be caught, leaving the child under the sole watch of the loyal dog and the falcon, each under the assumption that they were the only ones sneaking off.

The uproar of barking, screeching, and crying echoing off the stone walls drew no assistance from any quarter.

The wolf had paused when Gellert began barking, but as the

moments passed without any sign of reaction from anywhere in the castle, its posture began to change, and it stood up straighter.

It took another slow, deliberate step forward, raising its tail and lifting its lips to let its teeth flash in the sunlight and said, low voice cutting through Gellert's furious barking with calm, predatory confidence, "You don't scare me, dog."

Swift screeched, "You should be afraid! Take one more step and I'll rip out your heart!"

The wolf flicked one ear, almost in amusement, but didn't back down.

"Just give me the child, and I won't have to kill you." It said instead, staring directly across the room with those searing yellow eyes at Gellert, like Swift wasn't even there.

Zim was smaller than its head, so zur threat wasn't exactly believable, and they all knew it was nothing but words.

But so help zim sky, Swift would kill that wolf and die trying if it meant protecting the prince's son.

Gellert clearly had the same thoughts, because he made a sudden

mock-lunge with a vicious snarl, making the wolf skitter backward in alarm. Swift might have only had words to offer, but Gellert could back up his threats with his teeth. He was no young pup, he knew how to fight, and he was willing.

Gellert pressed this sudden display of fear on the wolf's part, advancing halfway across the room, snarling viciously, all his fur standing on end, making him look bigger than he really was, his whole body tensed like an arrow on the string, ready at any moment to leap into violence.

Swift felt just as tense, sitting on zur perch, unable to do anything to help. Zim could try swoop at its eyes and head head, but it would be a risk. A single snap of those jaws could crush zim in a moment, and Swift likely wouldn't get a second chance if zur bluff was called.

But there was one thing zim could do – zim leapt and flew as fast as zim could to the cradle and landed on the railing above the bawling child's head, ready to make a final stand if the wolf got past Gellert, hoping that if the child could see zim, he would take some comfort. That part at least worked – the child was familiar with zim, and calmed his screams to whimpers at the sight of zim.

Swift stayed there to comfort the child, but kept both eyes on the

standoff, unable to hear zur own racing heartbeat over the sounds of snarling and snapping from Gellert and the wolf.

Gellert had advanced to the middle of the room, backing the wolf into the corner, always keeping himself between the wolf and the cradle where both the child, and now Swift were waiting, defenceless. Every line of the wolfhound's body promised bloody violence, without a single shred of hesitation or fear visible.

For its part, the wolf snarled back for all it was worth, but it had taken back those two brazen steps it had originally made, until it was backed into the corner, still snarling, ears pinned flat.

Gellert stopped, stiff-legged and poised to lunge, and snarled, flashing his teeth, "Leave now, back the way you came, if you value your life!"

The wolf gave another snarl, but even to Swift, it was clear this was made out of of fear rather than aggression. This became even clearer when it cried, "If I leave without anything to show for it, my journey here will have been wasted! Have pity on me, and my pups!"

Gellert lunged and snapped at the wolf's tail, forcing it to skitter back towards the window to avoid his teeth.

Drawing back again to the middle of the room, Gellert growled, “If you force me to fight you, you will have lost more than your time! I will not let you kill my prince’s son, I will kill you or die trying before I let you get even close! This small bit of meat isn’t worth your life, wolf, and I swear by my own, it is your life you will lose if you don’t leave now while I still give you the chance!”

Cringing now in earnest, tail tucked between its legs, the wolf pressed itself to the wall, inching towards the window. “Mercy, give me mercy, please, dog, I give in, you win. Let me leave and I swear I won’t return!”

“Go! Now!” Gellert barked, “Before I change my mind!”

Without another moment of hesitation, the wolf turned and leapt back out the window.

Finally now here was something Swift could do to help. Without waiting to be asked, Swift launched himself into the air and swept out the window and up into the sky, immediately spotting the wolf racing away across the grass towards the castle’s wall. Gaining altitude, Swift arrowed after it, determined not to let it out of his sight until there was no chance of it coming back. If need be, he would follow it to the ends of the earth.

And if it tried to turn around and sneak back, Swift would be back ahead of it to warn Gellert before it could reach the nursery again.

The wolf darted past a sleeping guard at the gate and sped away across the plain, and Swift sped after it, fast as an arrow and with eyes sharp enough not to miss any sign of trickery, refusing to let the wolf out of his sight until he knew it was safe.

081: The Well of the Depths

Neopronouns: zim/zur/zam/zurak which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with zim

Replace him with zam

Replace his with zur

Replace himself with zurak

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Zim is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as zim gets a

fence set up around zur yard so the puppy can go outside without zam having to walk it. Zur uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting zam use, since zim lost zur. Zim's going to buy toys and train the puppy zurak."

081: The Well of the Depths

Jack Coral somehow managed to avoid breaking anything when zim was suddenly shoved through the trapdoor from behind, with no chance to grab onto the ladder or even think about what was happening.

The only thing, zim knew, that had stopped zam from breaking both zur arms and legs in the sudden, long drop to solid stone was the ring Malordia had given zam – zim hadn't wanted to risk testing the affects she'd said it would have, but, well, this was certainly proof she hadn't just been trying to cheer zam up.

“As long as you intend to come back to me to keep your promise,” She'd said, “This ring will protect you from any harm that could come to you. No weapon will be able to harm you, no injury will you be able to receive from any source.”

Well, now zim knew it was true. Nothing even felt bruised as zim picked zurak up off the cold stone floor, staring around confusedly in the darkness.

Despite the fact that the trapdoor was now shut above zam, somehow, there was still a faint light visible, letting zim see the

walls opposite zam as dark shapes against lighter grey, rather than the pitch, unwavering blackness zim had been expecting.

Looking around, Jack could see two walls on either side of where the ladder was, with a darker space stretching out directly across from zam. A hallway of some sort, leading deeper into the temple.

Zim glanced back up to where the ladder led, contemplating the idea of climbing back up to test the trap door, but it seemed like a waste of time. Well, if zim was being honest with zurak, mostly zim wanted to explore deeper into the temple, like zim had been planning when zim had looked down the trapdoor in the first place.

Why should that plan change now just because zim had been trapped in here?

Well, obviously there were many reasons, like trying to get help to make sure zim wasn't left in here to starve, but Jack had never been able to resist zur curiosity.

With newborn confidence spawned by the now indisputable effect of Malordia's ring, Jack set off down the dark corridor, moving to the left so zim could trace a hand down the wall for guidance. The stone was smooth and cool beneath zur fingers, and felt familiar

somehow. Like a song whose lyrics zim could just barely not remember. It was what had drawn zam to hover at the top of the trapdoor in the first place.

There was something mermaic about this place, but more than that, there was something...tervean.

Had zim finally found the fabled Well of the Depths?

Well there was only one way to find out!

Zim strode ahead, eager to find where the path led zam.

The hallway turned out to be rather short, leading to a square room with empty stone braizures protruding from the walls in each corner, with another smaller, empty room in front, and two hallways on either side. After tracing zur way around the two rooms, Jack paused in the middle, feeling the slight breeze that drifted from the two hallways, deciding which way to go.

The tervean-mermaic pull came from the hallway to the right of the hallway with the trap door, but Jack could also sense that there were more rooms to be explored on the left.

Zim wavered there for a few moments, trying to decide which

curiosity to follow first, but decided to go for the deeper pull. Maybe there were treasures hiding in the other rooms, but the only real thing zim was here to find was the Well.

Zim set off down the left hallway, and found it opened to a larger room than the others, with a double row of pillars in the center. The pull was getting stronger, so zim didn't stop to trace zur way all around the room, zim just kept on going.

At the end of this room was another hall, which turned sharply at a right angle. Zim traced a hand down one wall as zim hurried up it for what felt like several hundred feet. This one hallway was probably longer than all the other rooms zim had been in so far combined, but with every step, the pull was getting stronger, until zim found zurak breaking into an excited run.

The hallway ended in a round room with a circular wall in the center, which zim followed without hesitation, feeling in zur bones that on the other side would be the thing zim had been searching for for so long.

And as zim rounded the curve of the room, a doorway opened into the center, and there it was – the source of the soul-deep pull that had led zam here from across the city above.

The Well of the Depths.

It was a circular pool in the center of the floor, with blue-black water that shone silver from within lapping at the stone edges.

There was nothing left to lose, and any shred of caution that Jack Coral had ever harbored was swept away by the euphoria of zur discovery after so many years of searching.

Without a moment of hesitation, zim took off running, and dove into the depths without looking back.

082: Mickey Mouse in Out of the Dreadful Depths

Neopronouns: xal/xalv/xallix/xalexir which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with xal

Replace him with xalv

Replace his with xallix

Replace himself with xalexir

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Xal is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as xal gets a fence

set up around xallix yard so the puppy can go outside without xalv having to walk it. Xallix uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting xalv use, since xal lost xallix. Xal's going to buy toys and train the puppy xalexir."

Neopronouns: nova/novas/novaself which will follow the same rules as it/its/itself for this example.

Replace it with nova

Replace its with novas

Replace itself with novaself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Nova is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as nova gets a

fence set up around novas yard so the puppy can go outside without nova having to walk it. Novas uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting nova use, since nova lost novas. Nova's going to buy toys and train the puppy novaself."

082: Mickey Mouse in Out of the Dreadful Depths

Mickey Mouse-Mallaire reached languidly for the bowl of candy, grabbed a piece of gum and, with lazy fingers, unwrapped it and stuck it in xallix mouth, putting the wrapper in xallix pocket.

"Be a sport," xal repeated to the black-furred cattan man across the table. "Be a sport, Admiral, and send me across on a destroyer. Never been on a destroyer except in port. It would be a new experience, I'd enjoy it a lot, and you know Minnie's been begging for years...."

In the palm-shaded veranda of this club-house in Manila, Admiral Pete Struthers, the first catan to make Admiral in the U. Q. N., regarded with undisguised disfavor the young mousan in the wicker chair in front of him.

He looked at the squat chest and the broad ears, at the monochrome blue shorts, suspenders and fingerless gloves with the comically oversized cuffs, at the short, fine black fur and the friendly smile on the brown, hairless face below, large white eyes framed by huge round glasses held on with a blue elastic band.

A likable chap, this Mickey, but lazy—just an idler—he had

concluded. Been playing around the island for the last two months—resting up, xal had said. And from what? Pete had questioned disdainfully.

Admiral Struthers did not like indolents, but it would have saved him money if he had really got an answer to his question and had learned just why and how Mickey Mouse-Mallaire had earned a vacation.

"You, on a destroyer!" he laughed disdainfully, and the lips on his catan face twisted into a wry smile. "That would be too rough an experience for you, I am afraid, Mouse-Mallaire. Destroyers pitch about quite a bit, you know."

He included in his smile the destroyer captain herself and the other young mousan who completed their party. The enban had a charming smile and knew it; they used it in reply to the Admiral's remark.

"I have asked Mvr. Mouse-Mallaire and xallix partner to come with us on the *Adelaide*," the young enban said. "We shall be leaving in another month—but Mickey tells me xal and Minnie have other plans."

"Worse and worse," was the Admiral's comment, shaking his head.

"Your godfather's yacht is not even as steady as a destroyer. Now I would suggest a nice, comfortable cruise liner...."

Mickey Mouse-Mallaire did not miss the official glances of amusement, but xallix calm complacency was unruffled. "No," xal said, "I just don't fancy liners. Too many people at once. Fact is, Minnie and I have been thinking of sailing across to the mainland by ourselves."

Pete's smile increased to a short, incredulous laugh. "I would make a bet you wouldn't get fifty miles from the harbor!"

The mousan reached for the candy bowl again, this time pocketing several pieces of gum, lollipops, a box of candy sticks, and a few of the chocolates. "How much of a bet?" xal asked casually. "What will you bet that we don't sail alone from here to—where are you stationed?—Southern Peak?—from here to Southern Peak?"

"Humph!" was Pete's snorted reply. "I would bet twenty-five thousand on that, and take the money you lost for Mx. Violinist's charity."

"Now that's an idea," said Mouse-Mallaire. Xal pulled a wallet out of one of xallix candy-free pockets and began taking out a checkbook.

"In case I lose," xal explained, "I might be hard to find, so I will just ask Mx. Violinist to hold the balance for me. I'm sure they won't mind." Despite the confidence of the statement, Mickey still visibly looked over at Mx. Violinist for confirmation, pen hovering over the paper, and only wrote xallix signature when xal received a nod in return.

Looking back at Pete, Mickey said without any further hesitation, "You can do the same." Xal lifted xallix phone to show that xal'd just transferred twenty-five thousand credits to Vinnie Violinist.

Continuing, Mickey said, "Whoever wins gets their 25K back, and the loser's goes to Vinnie for their charity."

"You're not serious," protested the Admiral. Where did this mousan even get 25K?

But Mickey just shrugged with a smile. "Sure I'm serious! The bank will take that transfer seriously, I promise you. And right about now Minnie should be finalizing the purchase for just the sloop I want for the trip ... had my eye on her for the past month!"

"But, Mickey," began Vinnie Vincent in clear concern, "you don't mean to risk your lives on a foolish bet?" They reached over to touch

xallix hand in clear concern.

Mickey reached with xallix other hand to tenderly pat theirs. "I'm touched by your concern," xal said, and there was an undertone of seriousness beneath xallix raillery, "but save your sympathy for the Admiral. The navy can't bluff me, and I'm not one to lose." Xal suddenly rose briskly from xallix chair as Vinnie sat back in theirs.

"Mouse-Mallaire...." said Admiral Pete Struthers. He was thinking deeply, trying to recollect. "Mickey Mouse.... I have a book by someone of that name—travel and adventure and knocking about the world. Young enby, are you *the* Mickey Mouse?"

"Why, yes, if you wish to put it that way," agreed the other. "Though I go by Mickey Mouse-Mallaire now that Minnie and I've gotten married, we combined our names, you see. And there's always room for a third." Xal winked meaningfully at Vinnie as xal moved towards the door.

"I must be running along," xal said, "and meet Minnie at that boat. See you all in Southern Peak!"

- - -

The first rays of the sun touched with golden fingers the tops of the lazy swells of the Pacific. Here and there a wave broke to spray under the steady wind and became a shower of molten metal. And in the boat, whose sails caught now and then the touch of morning, Mickey Mouse-Mallaire and Minnie Mallaire-Mouse gradually stirred themselves with the first touch of sunlight, and got prepared for the day, which didn't take long, as they'd slept in their usual clothes.

Mickey left the cabin first, and looked first at the compass and checked xallix course, then made sure of the lashing about the helm. The steady trade-winds had borne them on through the night, and xal nodded with satisfaction as xal prepared to lower xallix lights as the sky brightened. Xal was reaching for a line as the little craft hung for an instant on the top of a wave. And in that instant xallix eyes caught a marking of white on the dim waters ahead.

"Breakers!" xal shouted instinctively to Minnie, and leaped for the lashed wheel at almost the same instant Minnie reached it. Nova swung off to leeward and eased a bit on the main-sheet, trusting Mickey's statement without question, then lashed the wheel again to hold on the new course at a gesture from xalv.

Again from a wave-crest xal stared from under a sheltering hand.

The breakers were there—the smooth swells were foaming—breaking in mid-ocean where the chart, xal knew, showed water a mile deep. Beyond the white line was a three-master, her sails shivering in the breeze.

The big sailing ship swung off on a new tack as xal watched. Was she dodging those breakers? xal wondered. Then xal stared in amazement through the growing light at the unbroken swells where the white line had been.

“What in the world...?” Minnie whispered.

Mickey rubbed xallix sleepy eyes with a savage hand and stared again. There were no breakers, not anymore—the sea was an even expanse of heaving water.

"I could swear I saw them!" xal told Minnie, but forgot this perplexing occurrence in the still more perplexing maneuvers of the sailing ship.

This steady wind—for smooth handling—was all that such a craft could ask for, yet here was this old-timer of the sea with a full spread of canvas booming and cracking as the ship jibed. She rolled far over as the two mice watched, recovered, and tore off on a long, sweeping

circle.

The two-mousan crew of the little sloop should have been preparing breakfast for themselves, as they had for many mornings past, but, instead, without another word spoken between them, Minnie swung the little craft into the wind and watched for near an hour the erratic rushes and shivering haltings of the larger ship. But long before this time had passed they both knew they were observing the aimless maneuvers of an uncrewed vessel.

They watched, waiting for their chance for a closer inspection through mutual curiosity.

The three-master was named the *Minnie R.*, which they read from the dingy painting of the stern with a combination of delight and dread, and she hung quivering in the wind when they cautiously approached her. There was a broken log-line that swept down from the stern, and xal caught this and made their own boat fast. Then, watching for their chance, they drew as close as they could safely get, and jumped into the water to swim over.

“Just like old times,” Minnie told Mickey as they expertly scaled the side. They had just made it all the way up and pulled themselves over the rail when the ship abruptly sped off on another wild and

random tack.

The two mice looked quickly about the deserted deck. "Ahoy, there!" Mickey shouted, but the straining of rope and spars was xallix only answer. Sharing a glance with Minnie, nova could only shrug in return. Canvas was whipping to ribbons, sheets cracked their frayed ends like lashes as the booms swung wildly, but a few sails still survived intact and caught the air like grasping hands desperate for escape.

They had found themselves on the after deck, and Mickey leaped first for the wheel that was kicking and whirling with the swing of the rudder as Minnie darted in another direction. A glance at the canvas that still drew, and xal set her on a course with a few steadying pulls. Minnie came back to xallix side with rope, and nova expertly lashed the wheel into place while xal held it with a quick turn or two and watched the ship steady down to a smooth slicing of the waves from the west.

And only then did the two micean take time to quiet their panting breathing and look about them in more detail in the unnatural quiet of this strangely deserted deck.

Mickey shouted again and walked to a companionway to repeat the hail. Only an echo, sounding hollowly from below, replied to break the vast silence.

It was puzzling—inconceivable. Mickey looked about xalv to note the lifeboats snug and undisturbed in their places. No sign there of an abandonment of the boat, but abandoned she was, as the silence told only too plainly. Nova whispered as they went below, “I have an uncanny feeling of the crew’s presence – as if they’ve walked where we’re walking, shouted where you shouted, just a brief hour or two before.”

“I feel the same.” Mickey whispered back. Something about the dead silence inside the ship made speaking any louder seem like sacrilege.

The door of the captain's cabin was broken in, hanging drunkenly from one hinge. The log-book was open; there were papers on a rude desk. The bunk was empty where the blankets had been thrown hurriedly aside. A fetid stench emanated from the doorway in little drafts.

Minnie went in first, and Mickey followed. Xal could almost see the skipper of this mystery ship leaping frantically from their bed at

some sudden call or commotion. A chair was smashed and broken, and when Minnie reached out to examined it curiously, nova almost immediately recoiled with a cry of disgust, wiping from novas hands on one of the blankets a disgusting slime that was smeared stickily on the splintered fragments of wood. The stench was magnified to almost unbearable levels, and they quickly passed up further examination of this room, Minnie disgustedly shaking novas hand to try and get the rest of the reeking slime off.

“Ugh! What is this stuff?” nova demanded.

“I don’t know,” Mickey said in concern, “but we’d better wash it off in case it’s toxic.”

They found a lavatory, and Minnie gratefully washed novas hands, though the sense of close watchfullness they both felt from the ship seemed even more pronounced with the soft sound of the running water interrupting the silence.

Up front in the forecastle, Mickey felt again irresistibly the recent presence of the crew. And again xal found silence and emptiness and a disorder that told of a fear-stricken flight. The odor that sickened and nauseated the exploring mice was everywhere here, and much stronger. Xal was glad to gain the freedom of the wind-swept deck

and rid xallix lungs of the vile breath within the vessel.

After catching their breath, the two could only stand and look at each other, silent and bewildered, both thinking the same thing with no need to say it aloud -- there was not a living soul aboard the ship —no sign of life!

But they were both startled when suddenly, a moaning, whimpering cry came from forward on the deck!

Minnie was the first to move, leaping across a disorder of tangled rope to race toward the bow without hesitation, with Mickey not far behind. Nova stopped short, and Mickey almost ran right into nova, then peered around novas shoulder to see that nova was looking at a large, battered cage. Again the moaning sound came to their pricked ears—there was something that still lived on board the ill-fated ship after all.

Cautiously, the two drew closer, and Mickey could see a great, huddled, furry mass that crouched and cowered in a corner of the cage, red-orange fur vivid in a few beams of sunlight that cut through the fabric that partly covered the enclosure.

“An orangutan.” Minnie whispered for Mickey’s benefit, and the orangutan moaned and whimpered in abject fear, its face turned away, not seeming to realize they were there yet.

Mickey’s thoughts sped. Had this been the terror that drove the crew into the sea? Had this animal escaped and menaced the officers and crew? But xal dismissed the thought almost as soon as it formed, xal well knew it was absurd. The thick wood bars of the cage were broken inward, not outward, creating a razor-wall of splinters that the animal was penned in by even more than it had originally been. The cage’s top had been partially crushed, caving in slightly, and the heavy chain that held the whole to the deck was extended to its full length.

Baffled, bewildered, Mickey scratched xallix head, stepping back from the cage. "Too much for me," xal said slowly, "entirely too much for me! Just what could have happened here?"

Minnie shook novas head silently in agreement.

Mickey added, thinking aloud, “But we can't sail this old hooker alone; we’ll have to get out the way we came, and let her drift.”

“We have to let this poor thing loose,” Minnie said, “At least give it run of the ship instead of being stuck out here in the sun, the poor thing will bake to death.” As nova said this, nova went forward and, with concerted effort, ripped one of the broken bars completely away from the cage.

Mickey joined in to help, and the terrified orangutan turned its head to watch their progress with wide eyes as they slowly dismantled a section of the bars just big enough for the animal to come through if it wanted to. The rest were still too intact for even their combined strength to budge.

“Well, that’s the best we can do for now about this cage.” Minnie said, brushing wood particles from novas hands, “But let me go back down and get a bowl of water and see if there’s any fruit.”

Nova ran to do so, leaving Mickey alone with the orangutan, which had now cautiously turned to fully face xalv and the new opening in the cage.

Mickey tried to look non-threatening, and beckoned the animal forward the way xal would a scared cat, speaking softly and soothingly, “Come on out, old fellow, Mickey’s not gonna hurt ya, it’s safe now. Whatever happened here’s already happened. Come on

out, we're gonna get you some water and food, does that sound good?" The orangutan shifted slightly, still hunched over, but hesitantly began to shuffle towards the opening. Mickey encouraged it with, "That's it, it's alright! Come on out of that nasty old cage, we're friendly, you don't have to be trapped in there any more, come on out."

Xal hated to see animals treated with cruelty, and xal couldn't imagine putting an animal in a cage like this and leaving it out on the deck of the ship to suffer the elements. Even if it wasn't Aware, it still deserved to be treated with basic respect and compassion. The very least the sailors could have done was give it proper shelter. And why were they transporting it in the first place? Mickey had never seen or heard of an orangutan before now, but it didn't seem like a domestic animal to xalv. Taking it across the ocean just seemed cruel.

Slowly, cautiously, not taking its eyes off Mickey, the orangutan very slowly and purposefully reached out a hand towards the one Mickey had at xallix side.

Mickey held xallix hand out without hesitation, and helped the orangutan climb through the gap, as xal realized with a sudden jolt that this wasn't normal behavior for an animal --

“Are you aware?” Xal asked, even more horrified for the orangutan’s treatment if the answer was yes.

The orangutan nodded, letting go of Mickey’s hand so it could lift its own hand to its mouth, shaking its head. Clearly saying that it hadn’t learned to speak yet, though it clearly understood. Mickey was stunned with outrage. Becoming Aware was a process that took time, not something that could have gotten to this stage in the short length of time this ship would have been at sea – and the crew had still kept it locked up in a cage and left out in the sun?

“Do you want to go inside the ship for the shade?” Xal asked. Xal couldn’t think of anything to say to express how angry xal was over its treatment.

The orangutan nodded vehemently, and led the way, bounding to the open doorway on all fours, with Mickey running to catch up, not wanting Minnie to be startled if nova was on nova’s way back.

The orangutan didn’t hesitate when it reached the stairwell where the smell hit Mickey in the face like a brick wall, it just kept going, ducking into the first room they found, which was a crew quarters. It hopped onto the closest bunk and pulled the blanket up around its shoulders. Mickey stayed just outside the door so Minnie would be

able to find them.

It didn't take nova long to come back from the depths of the ship. Nova had managed to find a few oranges, a lot of prunes, hardtack, dried beans, and salt pork, all of it untouched by whatever disaster had struck the crew, except for the ever-present stench on the outside of the containers. Thankfully, they had all been carefully stored, so the food inside was safe. Minnie had put as much as nova could carry into a small crate, found a pot and a ladle, and carried it all up, intending to go back for the rest. There was no point letting it go to waste, it might as go back on their ship with them.

Mickey introduced Minnie to the orangutan, they gently questioned it to the best of their ability only to learn it had nothing helpful to share, and they let it have any of the currently-edible food it wanted, before the three of them went back down into the bowels of the ship to grab the rest of the supplies.

They found more dried and salted foods, clothes, which they packed up, and a few dirt pans for cats, but found no trace of the animals themselves, though they looked everywhere they could think of.

It took a while, but with the three of them working together, they managed to pack up everything that was carryable and would fit on

their boat, and attached floats to them, piling them up by the railing. By the time they were done, Mickey found xalexir actually getting used to the stench.

Xal went below one last time, the orangutanan shadowing xallix every step like a ghost while Minnie waited up top, and came quickly back with the log-book and papers from the captain's room. They'd already found and carefully packed up as many personal possessions from the crew quarters as they could, to send back to the families of the missing.

Xal tied the log book and other papers from the captains room in a tight wrapping of oilcloth from the galley and hung them at xallix belt to make sure they wouldn't float away, while Minnie took the wheel again and brought the cumbersome craft slowly into the wind.

The bare mast of their own sloop was bobbing alongside on the rope as Mickey went down the line and swam over to her first, then carefully brought it back up beside the larger ship so the loot could be lowered down with ropes before Minnie and the orangutanan climbed down.

Fending off from the wallowing hulk, Mickey cut the line while Minnie and the orangutanan stowed the supplies, and the small craft

slipped slowly astern as the big vessel fell off in the wind and drew lumberingly away on her unguided course.

She vanished into the clear-cut horizon before the watching mice and orangutanan ceased their staring and Mickey pricked a point upon xallix chart that xal estimated was xallix current position.

And they all three watched vainly for some sign of life on the heaving waters as Minnie set the sloop back on her easterly course.

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It was two young mice trailed by an orangutanan who walked with brisk strides into the office of Admiral Struthers. The gold-striped arm of the uniformed man was extended in quick greeting.

"Made it, did you?" he exclaimed. "Congratulations!"

"All O.K.," Mickey agreed shortly. "Ship and log are ready for your verification."

"Talk sense," said the officer. "Have any trouble or excitement? Or perhaps you are more interested in collecting a certain bet than you are in discussing the trip. And who's your new friend there?"

"Damn the bet!" said the young enby fervently. "And that's just what I am here for—to talk about the trip and my friend. There were some little incidents that may interest you."

Xal and Minnie painted for the Admiral in brief, terse sentences the picture of that dawn on the Pacific, the line of breakers, white in the vanishing night, the abandoned ship beyond, cracking her canvas to tatters in the freshening breeze. And xal told of their boarding her and of what they had found, and that their new friend the still-unnamed orangutan had been witness, but couldn't explain what had happened, from a combination of shock and not yet being fully Aware.

"Where was this?" asked the officer, and Mickey gave the position as xal had checked it on the map.

"I reported the derelict to a passing steamer that same day," xal added, but the Admiral was calling for a chart. He spread it on the desk before himself and placed the tip of a pencil in the center of an unbroken expanse.

"Breakers, you said?" he questioned. "Why, there are hundreds of fathoms here."

"We know it," Minnie agreed, stepping forward firmly, "but we saw them—a stretch of white water for an eighth of a mile. I know it's impossible, but it's true. But forget that for now, Admiral. Look at this." nova opened a brief case and took out a log-book and some other papers Mickey had collected.

"The log of the *Minnie R.*," nova explained briefly. "And yes, I know the irony. Nothing in this log but routine entries up to that morning and then nothing at all."

"Abandoned," mused the Admiral, "and they did not take to the boats. There have been other instances—never explained."

"See if this helps any," suggested Mickey, and moved to Minnie's side to grab the other two sheets of paper from the case. "They were in the captain's cabin," xal added.

Admiral Struthers glanced at them, then settled back in his chair.

"Dated September fourth," he said. "That would have been the day previous to the time you found her." The writing was plain, in a careful, well-formed hand. He cleared his throat and read aloud:

"Written by Jeremiah Wilkens of Salem, Mass., master of the *Minnie R.*, bound from Shanghai to San Pedro. I have sailed the seas for forty years, and for the first time I am afraid. I hope I may destroy this paper when the lights of San Pedro are safe in sight, but I am writing here what it would shame me to set down in the ship's log, though I know there are stranger happenings on the face of the waters than man has ever seen—or has lived to tell.

All this day I have been filled with fear. I have been watched—I have felt it as surely as if a devil out of hell stood beside me with his eyes fastened on mine. The men have felt it, too. They have been frightened at nothing and have tried to conceal it as I have done.—
And the animals....

"A shark has followed us for days—it is gone to-day. The cats—we have three on board—have howled horribly and have hidden themselves in the cargo down below. The mate is bringing a big monkey to be sold in Los Angeles. An orang-outang, he calls it. It has been an ugly brute, shaking at the bars of its cage and showing its ugly teeth ever since we left port. But to-day it is crouched in a corner of its cage and will not stir even for food. The poor beast is in mortal terror.

"All this is more like the wandering talk of an old woman muttering

in a corner by the fireside of witches and the like than it is like a truthful account set down by Jeremiah Wilkins. And now that I have written it I see there is nothing to tell. Nothing but the shameful account of my fear of some horror beyond my knowing. And now that it is written I am tempted to destroy—No, I will wait—"

"And now what is this?" Admiral Struthers interrupted his reading to ask. He turned the paper to read a coarse, slanting scrawl at the bottom of the page.

"The eyes—the eyes—they are everywhere above us—God help—"
The writing trailed off in a straggling line.

The Admiral's lips drew themselves into a hard line. It was a moment before the catan raised his eyes to meet those of Mickey Mouse-Mallaire.

"You found this in the captain's cabin?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And the captain was—"

"Gone."

"Blood stains?"

"No, but the door had been burst off its hinges. There had been a struggle without a doubt."

"And your friend the orang-outangan cannot enlighten us?"

"No."

"What about the cats that were mentioned?"

"We saw no sign of them besides their dirt pans."

The officer mused for a minute or two.

"Did they go aboard another vessel?" he pondered. "Abandon ship—open the sea-cocks—sink it for the insurance?" He was trying vainly to find some answer to the problem, some explanation that would not impose too great a strain upon his own reason.

"We have reported to the owners," said Minnie. "The *Minnie R.* was not heavily insured."

The Admiral ruffled some papers on his desk to find a report.

"There has been another," he told his audience. "A tramp freighter is listed as missing. She was last reported due east of the position you give. She was coming this way—must have come through about the same water—" He caught himself up abruptly. Mickey sensed that an Admiral of the Navy must not lend too credulous an ear to impossible stories.

"You've had an interesting experience, Mvr. Mouse-Mallaire, M. Mallaire-Mouse, friend orang-outangan" he said, taking on a formal, dismissive tone. "Most interesting. Probably a derelict is the answer, some hull just afloat. We will send out a general warning."

He handed the loose papers and the log book to Mickey. "This stuff is rubbish," he stated with emphasis. "Captain Wilkins held his command a year or so too long."

"You will do nothing about it?" Mickey and Minnie asked simultaneously in astonishment.

"I said I would warn all shipping; there is nothing more to be done." the Admiral said shortly.

"I think there is." Mickey's black eyes were steady behind xallix glasses as xal regarded the man at the desk. "We intend to run it

down. There have been other such instances, as you said—never explained. We mean to find the answer."

Admiral Pete Struthers smiled indulgently. "Always after excitement, two you" he said. "You'll be co-writing another book, I expect. I shall look forward to reading it ... but just what are you two going to do?"

"We are going to the Islands," said Mickey quietly. "We are going to charter a small ship of some sort, and we are going out there to camp on that spot in the hope of seeing those eyes and what is behind them. We'll be leaving to-night."

Admiral Struthers leaned back to indulge in a hearty laugh. "I refused you a passage on a destroyer once," he said, "and it was an expensive mistake. I don't make the same mistake twice. Now I am going to offer you a trip....The *Bennington* is leaving to-day on a cruise to Manila. I'll hold her an extra hour or two if you would like to go. She can drop you at Honolulu or wherever you say. Lieutenant Commander Brent is in command—you remember him in Manila, of course."

"Fine," Mickey Mouse-Mallaire responded. "We'll be there, after we make arrangements for a plane to return our friend here home." Xal

gestured at the orangutan, who had been looking curiously around the room.

"And," xal added, as xal took the Admiral's hand, "if I didn't object to betting on a sure thing, I would make you a little proposition. I would bet any money that you would give your shirt to go along."

"I never bet, either," said Admiral Struthers, "on a sure loss. Now get out of here, you young trouble-shooters, and let the Navy get to work." His eyes were twinkling as he waved the young ones out.

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Minnie and Mickey found themselves comfortably fixed on the *Bennington*. Brent, her commander, was a fine example of the aggressive young chaps that the destroyer fleet breeds. And he liked to play cribbage, Mouse-Mallaire found. They were chugging away industriously the sixth night out when the first S.O.S. reached them. A message was placed before the commander. He read it and tossed it to Minnie, who was closer, as he rose from his chair.

"S.O.S.," said the radio sheet, "*Nagasaki Maru*, twenty-four thirty-five N., one five eight West. Struck something unknown. Down at the bow. May need help. Please stand by."

Captain Brent had left the room. A moment later, and the quiver and tremble of the *Bennington* told Mickey they were running full speed for the position of the stricken ship.

But: "Twenty-four thirty-five North," nova mused aloud to Mickey, "and less than two degrees west of where the poor old *Minnie R.* got hers. I wonder ... I wonder...."

"We will be there in four hours," said Captain Brent on his return. "Hope she lasts. But what have they struck out there? Derelict probably, though she should have had Admiral Struthers' warning."

Mickey Mouse-Mallaire made no reply other than: "Wait here a minute, Brent. I have something to show you."

Xal had not told the officer of their mission nor of the experience they'd shared, but xal did so now. And xal placed before him the wildly improbable statement of the late Captain Wilkins.

"There's something there, alright" surmised Captain Brent, studiously ignoring the fantastic elements of the story. "just awash, probably—no superstructure visible. Your *Minnie R.* hit the same thing."

"Something is there," Mickey agreed. "I wish I knew what."

"This stuff has got to you, has it?" asked Brent as he returned the papers of Captain Wilkins. He was quite evidently amused at the thought, and didn't bother to hide his disbelief.

"You weren't on the ship," said Minnie Mallaire, simply, as nova followed him out of the room. "There was nothing to see—nothing to tell. But we know...."

They followed Brent to the wireless room.

"Can you get the *Nagasaki*?" Brent asked.

"They know we are coming, sir," said the operator. "We seem to be the only one anywhere near."

He handed the captain another message. "Something odd about that," he said.

"*U. S. S. Bennington*," the captain read aloud. "We are still afloat. On even keel now, but low in water. No water coming in. Engines full speed ahead, but we make no headway. Apparently aground.

Nagasaki Maru."

"Why, that's impossible," Brent exclaimed impatiently. "What kind of foolishness—" He left the question uncompleted. The radio man was writing rapidly. Some message was coming at top speed. The three of them leaned over the radio man's shoulder to read as he wrote.

"*Bennington* help," the pencil was writing, "sinking fast—decks almost awash—we are being—"

In breathless silence they watched the pencil, poised above the paper while the operator listened tensely to the silent night.

Again his ear received the wild jumble of dots and dashes sent by a frenzied hand in that far-off room. His pencil automatically set down the words. "Help—help—" it wrote before Mickey Mouse-Mallaire's spellbound gaze, "the eyes—the eyes—it is attack—"

And again the black night held only the rush and roar of torn waters where the destroyer raced quivering through the darkness. The message, as those waiting well knew, would never be completed.

"A derelict!" Mickey exclaimed with angry scorn. But Captain Brent was already at a communication tube, too busy to notice.

"Chief? Captain Brent. Give her everything you've got. Drive the *Bennington* faster than she ever went before."

The slim ship was a quivering lance of steel that threw itself through foaming waters, that shot with an endless, roaring surge of speed toward that distant point in the heaving waste of the Pacific, and that seemed, to the three silent watchers on the bridge, to put the dragging miles behind them so slowly—so slowly.

"Let me see those papers," said Captain Brent, finally.

He read them in silence.

Then: "The eyes!" he read aloud. "The eyes! That is what this other poor devil said. My God, you mice, what is it? What can it be? We're not all insane."

"I don't know what I expected to find," said Mickey slowly. "I had thought of many things, each wilder than the next. This Captain Wilkins said the eyes were above him. I had visions of some sky monster ... I had even thought of some strange aircraft from out in space, perhaps, with round lights like eyes. I have pictured impossibilities! But now—" Mickey stopped short of saying what xal was thinking.

"Yes," the captain questioned insistantly, "now?"

"There were tales in olden times of the Kraken," said Minnie, knowing exactly what Mickey had stopped xalexir from saying aloud.

"The Kraken!" the captain scoffed. "A mythical monster of the sea. Why, that was just a fable."

"True," was Minnie's quiet reply, "that was just a fable. And one of the things I have learned over the years is how frequently there is a basis of fact underlying a fable. And, for that matter, how can we know there is no such monster, some relic of a Mesozoic species supposed to be extinct? How long did it take for humans to really start to accept Awareness in other species?"

The two mice stood motionless, staring far out ahead into the dark. And Brent, too, was silent. The three seemed to try with unaided eyes to penetrate the dark miles ahead and see what their minds refused to accept.

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It was still dark when the search-light's sweeping beam picked up

the black hull and broad, red-striped funnels of the *Nagasaki Maru*. She was riding high in the water, and her big bulk rolled and wallowed in the trough of the great swells.

The *Bennington* swept in a swift circle about the helpless hulk while the lights played incessantly upon her decks. And the watching eyes strained vainly for some signal to betoken life, for some sign that their mad race had not been quite vain. Her engines had been shut down; there was no steerage-way for the *Nagasaki Maru*, and, from all they could see, there were no human hands to drag at the levers of her waiting engines nor to twirl with sure touch the deserted helm. The *Nagasaki Maru* was abandoned.

The lights held steadily upon her as the *Bennington* came alongside and a boat was swung out smartly in its davits. But Mickey knew xal was not alone in xallix wild idea as to the cause of the catastrophe. They were all thinking of that terrible, mythical kraken.

"Throw your lights around the water occasionally," Brent ordered. "Let me know if you see anything."

"Yes sir," said the man at the search-light. "I will report if I spot any survivors or boats."

"Report anything you see," said Commander Brent curtly.

"You go aboard if you want to," he said, turning to Mickey and Minnie. "I will stay here and be ready if you need help."

It didn't take long to get a boat ready, or for the two mice and a search and rescue crew to climb aboard and set out.

Mickey nodded with approval as he looked back at the *Bennington* as the small boat pulled away in the dark, for there was activity apparent on the destroyer not warranted by a mere rescue at sea, showing that the captain was taking the threat seriously. Gun-crews rushed to their stations; the tarpaulin covers were off of the guns, and their slender lengths gleamed where they covered the course of the boat.

"Brent is ready," Mickey admitted softly to Minnie, "for anything."

"I hope so." Nova said softly back. Neither of them spoke above a whisper, not daring to make any more noise while surrounded by the black waves with only a few planks of wood between them and the other sailors and whatever lay beneath it.

They found the iron ladder against the ship's side, and a sailor sprang

for it and made his way aboard first. Mickey was not the last to set foot on deck, but xal still shuddered involuntarily at the eery silence xal knew awaited them.

It was the *Minnie R.* over again, as xal expected, but with a difference. The *Minnir R.*, before Mickey and Minnie boarded it, had been for some time exposed to the sun, while the *Nagasaki Maru* had not. And here there were slimy trails still wet on the decks.

Xal went first to the wireless room with Minnie, while the sailors spread out to search for survivors. Xal had to know the final answer to that interrupted message, and xal found it in emptiness. No radio controller was awaiting xalv there, nor even a body to show the loser of an unequal battle. But there was blood on the door-jamb where a body—the operator's body, Mickey was sure—had been smashed against the wood. A wisp of black hair in the blood gave its mute evidence of the hopeless fight. And the slime, like the trails on the deck, smeared with odorous vileness the whole room.

They went again to the deck, and, as on the other ship, xal breathed deeply to rid xallix lungs and nostrils of the abhorrent stench. The ensign in charge of the boarding party approached.

"What kind of a rotten mess is this?" she demanded. "The ship is

filthy and not a soul on board. Not a one of them, officers or crew, and the boats are all here. It's absolutely amazing, isn't it?"

"No," Mickey told her, "this is, unfortunately, about what we expected. What do you make of this?" Xal touched with xallix foot a broad trail that shone wet in the *Bennington's* lights.

"The Lord knows," said the ensign in wonder. "It's all over and it smells like a rotten dead fish. Well, we will be going back over, exiir."

She called to a petty officer to round up the crew, and the boat was brought alongside again. Mickey and Minnie went back across with the others.

They returned to the *Bennington* again through a pathway of light that Mickey knew was safe under the black muzzles of the destroyer's guns.

Or was it, xal asked xalexir. Safe! Was anything safe from this devilish mystery that could pluck each cowering sentient from the lowest depths of this steel freighter, that could drag her down in the water till the radio operator sent his cry: "We are sinking!..."

But they made it across safely nevertheless.

Xal told Brent quietly, after the ensign had finished report in on the lack of survivors to be found, of the struggles xal had found in the wireless room and its few remaining traces. And both micean had watched with the commander through the hour of deepest darkness while the *Bennington* steamed in slow circles about the abandoned hulk, while her search-lights played endlessly over the empty waters and the crew at the guns cast wondering glances at their skipper who ordered such strange procedure when no danger was there.

Eventually, Mickey and Minnie were forced to give up their vigil in return for sleep. As anxious as they were, they couldn't stay on their feet any longer without rest. Almost as soon as their heads touched their pillows, they were out like a light, and too tired to dream.

They woke with the first rays of dawn, and with daylight the scene across from the *Bennington* lost its sense of mysterious threat, and Mickey and Minnie were eager to return to the abandoned ship.

"We might find something," Minnie said to the captain as an attempt to bring him around to the idea, "some trace or indication of what we have to fight."

"I must leave," said Commander Brent. "Oh, I'm coming back, never fear," he added, at the looks of dismay on their faces. It was clear that the thought of leaving this mystery unsolved was more than these young seekers of adventure could accept.

"I'm coming back," Brent repeated firmly. "I've been in communication with the Admiral—Honolulu has relayed the messages through. All code, of course; we mustn't alarm the whole Pacific with our nightmares. The old cat says to stick around and get the low-down on this damn thing."

"Then why leave?" objected Mickey.

"Because I am coming around to your way of thinking, mice. Because I am as certain as can be that we have a monster of some sort to deal with ... and because I haven't any depth charges. I want to run up to the supply station at Honolulu and get a couple of ash-cans of TNT to lay on top of the brute if we sight him."

"Glory be!" said Mickey fervently. "That sounds like business. Go and get your eggs and perhaps we can feed them to this devil—raw.... And I think I'll stay here, if you will be back by dark."

"Me too, of course." Minnie added.

"Better not," the other objected; but the two mice overruled him.

"This thing attacks in the dark," Mickey said. "I will lay a little bet on that. It left the orangutan on the *Minnie R.*—quit at the first sign of daylight. We will be safe through the day, and besides, the beast has gutted this ship. It won't return, I imagine. And if we stay there for the day—live as they lived, those who manned that ship—I may have some information that will be of help when you get back. But for Heaven's sake, Brent, don't stop to pick any flowers on the way."

"It's your funerals," said Brent, not cheerfully. "The old cat said to give you every assistance, and perhaps that includes helping you commit suicide."

But Mickey Mouse-Mallaire and Minnie Mallaire-Mouse only laughed as Commander Brent gave his orders for a small boat to be lowered. A ship's lantern and rockets for night signals were taken at the officer's orders. "We'll be back before dark," he said, "but take these as a precaution."

One favor Mickey asked—that the ship's carpenter go over with them and help them to make a strong-barred retreat of the wireless cabin.

"And I'll talk to you occasionally," Minnie told Brent. "I tried the key while we were aboard; the wireless is working on its batteries, and I know the basics of how to use it."

Mickey waved a cheery good-by as the small boat pulled away. "And hurry back," xal called. The destroyer commander nodded an emphatic assent.

On board the *Nagasaki Maru*, Mickey directed the carpenter and its helpers in the work xal wanted done, while Minnie started up a search of the bowels of the ship. The carpenter-othran seemed to know instinctively where to put its hands on needed supplies, and the result was a virtual cage of strong oak bars enclosing the wireless room, and braces of oak to bar the single door.

Mickey was not assuming any bravado in xallix feeling of safety, but xal was doing what xal and Minnie had done in many other tight corners, and xal prepared their defences in advance.

These included weapons of offense as well. As the boat with the destroyer's crew pulled back to the *Bennington*, xal placed in easy reach in a corner of the room a heavy calibered rifle xal had taken from xallix belongings, and Minnie had novas sword.

And, still, with all xallix feeling of security, there was a strange depression fell upon xalv when the *Bennington's* narrow hull was small upon the horizon, and then that, too, was gone and only the heaving swells and the wallowing hulk were xallix companions.

Only these? Xal shivered slightly as xal thought of that unseen watcher with the devil-eyes whose presence Captain Wilkins had felt—and his crew, and the poor terrified ape! Xal deliberately put from xallix mind the thought of this; no use to start the day with morbid fears. Xal reassured xalexir that the orangutan was probably safely home by now by way of airplane, no more need to fear the sea. Xal went below to examine the cabins, and to find Minnie, trying not to rush, trying to keep xallix fear in check. But xal carried the heavy elephant gun with xalv wherever xal went, and was only reassured slightly when xal was back at Minnie's side.

Below decks the signs of the marauder were everywhere, yet there was little to be learned. The slimy trails dried quickly and vanished, but not before the two had traced them to the uttermost depths of the ship.

There was not a nook or corner that had gone unsearched in the horrible quest for sentient food. And one thing impressed itself forcibly upon the enby's mind: xal found a lantern, and xal used it of

necessity in xallix explorations, but this thing had gone through the dark and with unerring certainty had found its way to every victim.

"Can it see in the dark?" Mickey questioned aloud. "Or..." Xal visioned dimly some denizen of the vast depths, living beyond the limits of the sun's penetration, far in the abysmal darkness where its only light must be self-made. But xallix mind failed in the attempt to picture what manner of horror this thing might be.

"Or else it finds its way entirely by touch." Minnie offered.

Even in the hold its evil traces were found. There were tiers of metal drums that still shone wet in the light of Mickey lantern. Calcium carbide—for making acetylene, xal supposed—marked "Made in U.Q.N." The *Nagasaki* must have been westward bound.

The two went, after an hour or so, back up to the wireless room, and only when xal relaxed in the safety of the improvised fortress did xal realize how tense had been every nerve and muscle through xallix long search, even with the comfort of Minnie's presence. Nova tried the wireless and got an instant response from the destroyer.

"Don't shoot it too fast," Minnie spelled out slowly to the distant operator as nova spoke aloud for Mickey's benefit: "I am only a dub.

Just wanted to say hello and report all O.K."

"Fine," was the steady, careful response. "We have had a little trouble with our condensers—" There was a short pause, then the message continued, this portion dictated by the commander. "Delay not important. We will be back as agreed. Have picked up *S. S. Adelaide* bound east in your latitude. Warned her to take northerly course account derelict. See you later. Signed, Brent, commanding *U. S. S. Bennington*."

Minnie tapped off novas acknowledgement and closed the key.

Mickey suddenly realized xal had had no breakfast, and the hours had been slipping past, and said so aloud.

Xal decided to go down to the galley to prepare a pot of coffee and porridge, and left xallix gun behind for Minnie.

It was not the time or place for an enjoyable meal, but xal would have relished it more had xal not pictured the *Adelaide* and her lovely owner steaming across these threatening seas.

Unfortunately, the two knew the captain of the *Adelaide*. "Obstinate pigheaded old Scotchman!" Mickey exclaimed to Minnie, "Hope he

takes Brent's advice. Of course Brent couldn't tell him the truth. We can't blat this wild yarn all over the air or the passenger lines would have our scalps. But I wish the *Adelaide* was safe in Manila."

Minnie said nothing, but nodded in silent, clear anxiety.

They both knew Vinnie was aboard that boat.

After they ate, the two went back to exploring the ship in the afternoon, but their efforts were half-hearted and perfunctory. There was nothing more to be learned. But Mickey had seen in xallix mind some vague outline of what they must meet. Xal saw a something, mammoth, huge, that could grasp and hold an ocean freighter—against whose great body xal had seen the waves dash in a line of white spray. Yet a something that could force its way down narrow passages, could press with terrific strength on bolted doors and crush them inward, wrecked and splintered. Some serpentine thing that felt and saw its way and crawled so surely through the dark—found its prey—seized it—and carried off a man as easily as it might a mouse.

No octopus, no matter what proportions, filled the description.

Mickey gave up trying to see too clearly the awful thing. And then xal had, casually, not thinking, walked to the railing to look over the waves. And suddenly there had come to xalv a feeling of fear that

had sent the waves of cold trickling and prickling up xallix spine. Was there something really there?... A waiting lurking horror in the depths? It had been so terrible and oppressive that xal had turned tail and ran back to the wireless room on all fours in instinctive fear, and dragged the door shut behind xalv, startling Minnie at the table.

"The eyes," were all xal could think, "the eyes!..."

"There's something out there." was all xal could bring xalexir to say.

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The position of the deserted ship was south of the regular steamer lanes on the TransPacific run. Only a trace of smoke on the northern horizon marked through the afternoon the passage of other craft. It was a long and lonely vigil for the waiting mice. But the *Bennington* would return, and Minnie listened in at intervals hoping to hear her friendly signal. They took turns napping over the course of the day to keep their energy up, and nothing untoward happened, despite their rising anxieties.

The batteries operating the *Nagasaki's* wireless were none too strong, so Minnie saved their strength, though nova tried at times to raise the *Bennington* somewhere beyond their reach as the sun sank

lower in the afternoon sky.

It was touching the horizon when Minnie got Nova's first response. "Keep up the old nerve," admonished the slow, careful sending of the *Bennington's* operator. "We have been delayed but we are on our way. Signed, Brent."

That was easier said than done. In the wireless room, Mickey slid the oak brace across the door, and they both tried to pretend the action was nonchalant and unafraid as Xal laid out extra clips of cartridges. But Mickey's eyes persisted in following the sinking sun, and Minnie was practically glued to the wireless, and they watched, from within their self-made cage, the coming of the quick dark.

The protecting glare of day must be unbearable to this monster from the lightless depths, but that guardian daylight was vanishing. Mickey's mind was searching for additional means of defense. Xallix racing thoughts found it in the cargo Xal had seen. The drums of carbide! They could scatter it on the deck—it reacted with water, and those slimy arms, if they came and touched it, could find the contact hot.

Xal shared the idea with Minnie quickly, and they decided it was worth the risk of leaving the wireless room.

Quickly, they took the lantern and went hastily below at a run to stagger painstakingly slowly back, having to work together to carry one of the large drums between them. It suddenly felt like every struggled step was a race against time, and they were losing.

In the half-light that was left they together forced the cover off, then rolled the drum frantically about the swaying deck. The gray, earthly lumps of carbide formed erratic lines criss-crossing the wood. Useless perhaps, xal admitted to xalexir, but the threatening dark forced xalv to find every means of defense at xallix command. It was the only thing keeping xalv from panicking completely.

They had brought up and were scattering the contents of a second drum when the two stiffened abruptly, simultaneously, to rigid attention.

The ship, thrown broadside to the wide-spaced swells, had rolled endlessly with a monotonous motion. But now the deck beneath their feet was steadying. As they stood frozen, it assumed an abnormal levelness. The boat rose and fell with the waves, but it no longer rolled. There was something beneath holding, drawing on it.

Mickey knew in that frozen second what it meant, and a petrified glance at Minnie showed nova did as well. The drum clattered to the

rail as together they dashed for the wireless room. Minnie slammed and bolted the door behind them, and dove for novas sword.

Grabbing up xallix gun, Mickey watched with staring eyes where the deserted deck showed dim and vague in the light of the stars and the bow of the ship was lost in the uncertain dark of night.

Wide-eyed xal watched into the blackness, and listened with desperate attention for some slightest sound beyond the splashing of waves and the creaking of spars and the sound of xallix and Minnie's fearful breathing.

Far in the west a light appeared, to glow and vanish and glow again in the tumbling waters. The *Bennington*! Xallix heart leaped at the thought, then sank as xal knew the destroyer's lights would not appear from that direction.

Through an excruciating hour that seemed to crawl by in an eternity, the oncoming ship drew near, and xal knew with a sudden, startling certainty that it was the *Adelaide*—and Vinnie Violinist—coming on, through into the horror awaiting.

Mickey leaned forward tensely as a sound reached xallix pricked ears. A ghostly echo of a sound, like the softest of smooth, slipping fabric upon hard steel. And as xal listened, before xallix staring eyes,

a something came between xalv and the lighted yacht. Minnie gasped almost silently beside xalv.

The shape wavered and swung in the darkness. It was formless, uncertain of outline, and it swung in the night out beyond the ship's rail till it suddenly neared, waved high overhead, and the cold light of the stars shone in pale reflection from an enormous, staring eye.

It surmounted a serpentine form that took shape in the dim radiance without and came lower in undulating folds to suddenly crash heavily upon the deck.

Hardly aware of moving, Mickey found xalexir with Minnie next to the wireless, and novas hand was upon the key.

Then, fast as novas panic allowed, Minnie called frantically for the *Adelaide*. Nova spelled her name, over and over.... Would the sleepy operator never answer? Automatically, like a prayer, nova whispered what nova was doing for Mickey's benefit in a tone hardly louder than a breath, not daring to be any louder for fear of attracting the attention of the monster outside.

The *Bennington* broke in on nova. "Is that you, mice? What is up?" they demanded.

But Minnie kept up nova's slow spelling of the yacht's name. Nova must get a warning to them! Then nova realized that the *Bennington* could do it better.

"*Bennington*," nova called, "*Adelaide* approaching. I am attacked. Warn them off. Warn them—" Nova's frantic, hissing dots and dashes stopped suddenly. Beneath their feet the *Nagasaki Maru* was rolling again, swinging free to the lift and thrust of the swells beneath.

"Good God!" xal shouted aloud in dismay, "It's gone for the yacht!"

"*Adelaide*—" Minnie tapped frantically, "turn north—full speed—Head north. You are being attacked!"

Mickey groaned as xal saw the *Adelaide's* shining ports swing away from the safety of the north; the ship broached broadside to the waves and came slowly to a stop.

"*Bennington*," nova radioed. "Brent—it has got the *Adelaide*. Help—hurry! We have to go over!" Nova didn't need to check that plan of action with Mickey, because they both knew there was nothing that would stop them from going to the rescue.

Xal tore wildly at the barred door while Minnie took off the wireless,

and together they made a dash across the deck, only to crash in a painfully tangled heap of limbs against the rail where the slimy traces of the recent visitor made the deck slide out under their feet like soap.

They got untangled somehow, and how they lowered the lifeboat left by the *Bennington* into the water without disaster, neither could ever say for sure, looking back.

While Minnie swept down first, Mickey secured xallix rifle around xallix shoulder and with a rope, then wasted no time in joining Minnie in the boat so they could cast off in a frenzy of haste.

What could they do? Mickey hardly dared form the question. Only this stood clear and unanswerable in xallix mind: The yacht was in the monster's grip, and Vinnie Violinist was there on board. Vinnie Violinist, so smiling, so friendly, so lovable! Food for that horror from the depths....

Neither needed to speak aloud to know the other was thinking the same thing. They rowed with super-mousan strength to drive the heavy boat across the wave-swept distance that separated them from the yacht.

Between gasping breaths xal gave brief instructions to correct their course, xallix eyes locked on the lights in the quickly closing distance. As they drew near, xal saw, though indistinctly with the water that had splashed up onto xallix glasses, the unmistakable, snakelike weaving of horrible tenuous fingers, rolling and groping about the yacht.

They were plain as xal drew alongside. The trim ship rose and fell with the water, while over her side where the two mice approached swung a long, white monstrous rope of flesh. It retreated like the lash of a whip, and the horrified watchers saw as it went the struggling figure of a dogan in the grasp of flabby lips. And above them a single eye glared wickedly.

Another vile, twisting arm rose from the afterdeck with a screaming figure in its grasp and vanished into the water beyond the yacht. There were others writhing about the decks. Mickey saw them as they made the boat fast and clambered aboard.

A wave of reeking air enveloped xalv as xal reached the deck; the nauseous stench from the monster's tentacles was horrible beyond endurance. Xal gagged and choked as the stifling breath entered xallix lungs, Minnie coughing beside xalv.

A huge rope of slippery, throbbing flesh stretched its twisted length toward the stern. It contracted as xal watched into bulging muscular rings and withdrew from the afterdeck. The deadly end of it stopped in mid-air not twenty feet from where xal stood. The jawlike pincers on it held the limp form of an officer in its sucking grip, while above, in a protuberance like a gnarled horn, a single great eye glared into Mickey's two with insatiable hunger.

The beak opened sharply to drop its unconscious burden upon the deck, and the watching enby, petrified with horror, saw within the gaping maw great sucking discs and beyond them a brilliant glow. The whole cavernous pit was aflame with phosphorescent light. Dimly xal knew that this light explained the ability of the beastly arms to grope so surely in the dark.

The eye narrowed as the gaping, fleshy jaws distended, and Mickey Mouse-Mallaire, in a flash that galvanized xalv to action, was suddenly aware that xallix fight all their lives was on. Xal fired blindly from the hip, and the recoil of the heavy gun almost tore it from xallix hands. But xal knew xal had aimed true, and the toothless, seeking jaws whipped in agony back into the sea, leaving its prey behind.

There were other arms whose eyes were searching the stern of the

yacht, and no time to think.

The two micean plunged frenziedly down a companionway for the cabin they knew was Vinnie Violinist's. Were they in time? Could they save them if they found them?

Mickey's mind was in a turmoil of half-formed plans as xal rushed madly down the corridor after Minnie only to find the body of their beloved a limp huddle across the threshold of their cabin, with four other young people huddled by them, only slightly more conscious, one of them clutching an unconcious catan in their arms.

Vinnie was alive; xal knew it when Minnie swung their limp body across one shoulder, flashing a steely determined glance at xalv. Mickey somehow found the strength in xallix panic to yank the four strangers to their feet, hissing for them to follow if they wanted to live, helping to carry the unconcious catan when it became apparent the stranger who'd been holding them was too shocked to do it themselves at the moment.

As a panicked herd the group staggered up the stairs led by Minnie carrying Vinnie, with Mickey carrying the catan at the rear to keep them all together.

If xal could only breathe! Xallix throat was tight and strangling with the reeking putrescence in the air. It was no wonder Vinnie was unconcious and the others not far from it. And before xallix eyes was a picture of the strong oak bars of their own retreat. Somehow, some way, they had to get back to *Nagasaki Maru*.

An eye detected their group as they came on deck, and xal was forced to shove the limp body of the cat into two of the other survivor's combined arms as xal swung xallix rifle toward the glowing light within the opening jaws. The sucking discs cupped and wrinkled in dread readiness in the fleshy, toothless opening. Mickey emptied the magazine into the head, though xal knew this was only a feeler and a feeder for a still more horrible mouth in the monstrous body that rose and fell tremendously in the dark waters beyond. But it was typical of Mickey Mouse-Mallaire that, even in the horror and frenzy of the moment, xal rammed another clip of cartridges into xallix rifle, realized the humans xal had shoved the catan at were much more aware and could carry them better than xal could, and managed to fire another shot to ward off another reaching tentacle as Minnie led the group again at a charge towards their boat.

The forward deck for the moment was clear; it rose high with the weight of the writhing, twisting arms that weighed down the stern of the yacht where Mickey could see what looked like another two

members of the crew had taken refuge. Xal couldn't tell if either were Vinnie's god-father from this distance.

For a moment Mickey thought of stopping, of trying to help them too, but xal was forced to dismiss even the thought as another great eye came over the rail just feet away from Minnie at the head of the group. Once more xal used the gun with stunning effect, slung it back securely over xallix shoulder, then quickly leapt to grab the crew member who'd been dropped by the monster when they first arrived while Minnie hustled everyone into the boat.

Not knowing or caring if the body in xallix arms was even alive, Mickey jumped down into the boat, shoved the body into someone else's arms without even looking, and they frantically cast off, xal with one set of oars, and Minnie with the others, while the survivors crowded the middle.

They rowed with the stealthiest strokes they could manage with so many extra burdens aboard, trying to get away without drawing more attention to themselves. Mickey didn't know what they would do if their little lifeboat were attacked, there would just be no chance.

Behind xalv, reflected in Minnie's wide eyes, were whipping points

of light above the white brilliance of the yacht *Adelaide*, the search lights of the hungry monster. The boat was tossing in great waves that came from beyond, where a body, incredibly huge, was tearing the waters to foam. There were ghostly arms that shone in slimy wetness, that lashed searchingly in all directions, as the monster gave vent to its reaction at Mickey's attack.

There were now screaming human figures grasped in two of those flying jaws, and the enby felt guilt wash through xallix soul at not being able to rescue them as well. But there was nothing that could be done, not without risking everyone aboard the lifeboat now.

With the monster so enraged, they gave in to the fear and began to row with all speed now, desperate only to get as far away as possible as quickly as possible.

Even with their combined strength at the oars, with so many heavier humans as passengers, both Minnie and Mickey's breaths were coming in great choking sobs of sheer exhaustion when they finally pulled up beside the *Nagasaki Maru* and managed to pull the senseless forms of the survivors, both unconcious and concious, over the railing. One and all, with the humans now helping to carry those who were unconcious, they retreated into the frail shelter of the wireless room.

Stout had the oaken bars appeared, and safe their refuge in the barricaded room, but that was before the two mice had seen in horrible reality the fearful fury of this monster from the deep. Only the weight of the rifle still on xallix shoulders gave xalv the courage to keep upright. Xal placed the braces against the door and Minnie jumped with hopeless haste to seize the wireless key while the survivors huddled around the still unconcious forms of Vinnie, the catan, and the crew member on the floor.

"*Bennington*," Minnie called, and the answer came strong and clear: "Where are you.... Help—" For a moment novas fingers visibly froze upon the key, and the answering message in novas ears was unheeded as nova stared across the water, drawing Mickey's gaze away from nova and towards the final destruction of the yacht.

This craft that had dared to resist the onset of the brute, to fight against it, to wound it, was feeling the full fury of the monster's rage. The gleaming lights of the doomed ship were waving lines that swept to and fro in the grip of those monstrous arms. The boat beneath their feet was tossing in the waves that told of the titanic struggle. Mickey had meant to look south for some sign of the oncoming destroyer, but in fearful fascination xal stared spellbound where the masts of the trim yacht swept downward into the waves, where the green of her star-board lantern glowed faintly for an

instant, then vanished, to leave only the darkness and the starlit sea.

A voice aroused xalv from his stupefaction. "Where am I ... where am I?" Vinnie Violinist was asking in a frightened whisper. "That terrible thing—" their voice shook violently as the memory clearly returned to show again the horror they had witnessed. "Matilda, Where are we?" their voice was growing in strength with terror "What-- Mickey? Where did you— And the *Adelaide*— where is it?"

Mickey turned slowly toward them. The horrific turmoil of the past hour had suddenly numbed xallix brain, stunned xalv.

"The *Adelaide*—" xal mumbled, and groped fumblingly for coherent thoughts. Xal stared at the enban. They were half-risen from the floor where Minnie had laid them, supported by their friends, and the sight of their quivering face brought reason again to xallix mind. Xal knelt tenderly beside them and raised them in xallix arms, the others releasing them trustingly as Minnie came over to join the desperate embrace.

"Where is the yacht?" Vinnie repeated. "The *Adelaide*?"

"Gone," Minnie told them despairingly. "Lost!"

A thought struck Mickey "Was your god-father on board, Vinnie?"

Vinnie was clearly dazed.

"Lost," they repeated. "The *Adelaide*—lost!... No," they added in belated response to Mickey's question. "He was not there. But the rest of the crew—Captain MacPherson ... that horrible monster..." they buried their face in their hands as they realized what Mickey's silence meant. Their friends folded in around the three of them and those who were still unconcious, and Mickey was comforted by it. Xal needed some reminder that xal was still alive.

Supported by the group hug, xal did xal part to hold Vinnie's trembling figure upright as they whispered: "Where are we? Are we safe?"

"We may win through yet," xal told them through grim, set lips. Mickey realized abruptly that xal was seeing the face of Vinnie Vincent in the light. Xal had left a lantern burning!

Mickey withdrew xalexir from the hug as quick as xal could and sprang to put out the tell-tale light. In darkness and quiet was their only safety. But xal knew as xal sprang back to the illusion of safety with the others that xal had waited too long as a soft body crashed

heavily on the deck outside.

There was nothing but silence and heartbeats in the dark where they all crouched waiting—waiting.

A luminous something was glowing outside the cabin. It searched and prodded about the deserted deck to whip upward with the audible hiss of wet carbide. Another appeared; the rifle came carefully, silently over Mickey's shoulder as a pair of jaws gaped glowingly beyond the windows and an eye stared unblinkingly from its hornlike sheath.

Suddenly it crashed madly against the walls of the wireless room to shatter the glass and make kindling of the woodwork of the windowpane, sending gasps and cries of terror from everyone in the room. Mickey fired once, and then had to fire again before the specter vanished, but xal knew with sickening certainty that these wounds, however painful for the beast, were only messages to some central brain that would send other ravening tentacles against them.

But the oak bars had held.

For now.

Minnie reached in the brief interval for the key, and began sending out frantic calls for help. Xal strained xallix ears, hoping to hear some faint, friendly word of hope from the headset that Minnie didn't even bother to put on.

"—rocket," the wireless operator was suddenly saying. "Fire rockets. We can't find—" A swift, writhing arm wrapped crushingly about the cabin, drowning out the rest of the message.

Mickey fired into the gray mass that bulged with terrible muscular contractions through the window, and then fired again to aim lengthways of the arm and inflict as damaging a wound as xallix weapon would permit.

The first arm relaxed, but a score of others took up the attack. Again the sickening stench was about them as gaping jaws gleamed fiery beneath the hateful eyes and tore at the flimsy structure. Mickey jammed more cartridges into the gun and fired again and again and again, while Minnie leapt forward and fumbled for the rockets that Brent had given them. The other survivors were huddled in the center of the floor, squeezing together in a desperate bid for safety.

Minnie lighted one rocket with trembling fingers while Mickey kept firing with xallix rifle, and the first ball shot straight into a waiting

mouth. Another ignited a searing flame of acetylene gas where a wet arm writhed in the hot carbide trail. Then, in a move that almost stopped Mickey's heart with horror, Minnie jumped forward and leaned far out through the broken window to aim the rocket at the sky.

The red flares streamed upward high into the air, lighting up the deck and the writhing tentacles in blood red, then Mickey pulled nova back through the window in sheer terror.

A mass of undeterred, enraged muscle crashed against the door, which went to splinters under the impact, and only the two oak bars remained to hold in check the horrible tentacles and the darting heads. One beak forced its way between the bars. The oak gave under the strain as Mickey pulled vainly at the trigger of the suddenly nonfunctioning gun.

Behind rose shrieks of terror as the monstrous thing came on, and Mickey, in xallix terror, began to beat with frantic fury with the clubbed end of rifle at the fleshy snout. Then someone else joined in, bashing at the nose with a smashed piece of chair, screaming wordlessly, and Minnie jumped forward, slashing madly with nova sword, opening lines of deep wounds that glistened wetly in the blood-red light of the flares.

Then there was a rush of movement behind xalv in the dark, and Mickey Mouse-Mallaire smiled grimly in the numbing horror as xal realized that Vinnie Violinist was beside xalv now, and the other concious survivors beside them.

A piece of oak was in Vinnie's hands, and they were striking with desperate and silent fury at the slimy flesh, while the others did the same, roaring now with fury as well as fear.

But despite the grievous wounds it was receiving, the monster did not recoil or retreat, seeming to shrug off this vicious show of solidarity like they were not even there. Not even Minnie's sword deterred it. The hard flesh around the tentacles were apparently much less sensitive than the inside of the mouth.

It was the end, Mickey knew, and suddenly xal was glad. The nightmare was over, and the end was coming with xallix favorite people beside xalv. But Mickey Mouse-Mallaire was fighting on to the last, and xal tried to make xallix blows reach outward to the hateful devilish eye.

Mickey could suddenly see it plainly now, for the deck was abruptly flooded by a glare of blindingly white light. Xal saw the eye and the thick arm behind it, and the score of others that made a heaving,

knotted mass that was brilliant and wetly shining. Xal could see now how best to strike, and xal turned xallix gun to thrust the barrel end at the glaring eye.

It withdrew violently before this strike—the jaws slid backward to the deck. There were new sounds that hammered suddenly at xallix ears. "The guns! The guns!" a woman's familiar voice was screaming. Across the deck, where a search-light played, huge arms were lashing backward toward the sea. The waves beyond had vanished where a monstrous body shone wetly black in a blinding glare.

And Mickey hung panting, helpless, on the one remaining bar across the doorway to look where, beyond, her forward guns a spitting stream of staccato flashes, the *Bennington* tore the waves to high-thrown spray. Her four clean funnels swung far over as the slim ship, with her stabbing, crashing guns, swung in a sweeping circle to bear down upon the black bulk slowly sinking in the search-light's glare.

The vast body had vanished as the destroyer shot like one of her own projectiles over the spot where the beast had lain. And then, where she had passed, the sea arose in a heaving mound. The *Nagasaki Maru* beneath the feet of the watching survivors shuddered again as another depth charge roared its challenge to the master of the deeps.

The warship went careening on an arc to return and throw the full glare of her search-lights on the scene. They lighted a vast sea, strangely stilled. An oily smoothness leveled waves and ironed them out to show more clearly the convulsions of a torn mass that rose slowly into sight.

Mickey suddenly way found xalexir outside the cabin with no recollection of moving there. And xal knew that Minnie and Vinnie were again beside xalv as xal stared and stared at what the waters held.

A bloated serpent form beyond believing was struggling in the greasy swell. Its waving tentacles again were flung aloft in impotent fury, and, beneath them, where their thick ends jointed the body, a head with one horrible eye rose into the air. A thick-lipped mouth gaped open, and the gleam of molars shone white in the blinding glare.



[Image description: A black and white illustration of the sea monster assaulting a ship, with part of its central body with the large eye just above the surface of the water, and its smaller feelers snaking out of the water in every direction and latching onto the ship, which is tilting in the roiling waters. Image description end.]

The twisting body shuddered throughout its vast bulk, and the waving arms and futile staring eyes dropped helpless into the splashing sea. Again the revolting head was raised as the destroyer sent a rain of shells into its fearful mass. Once more the oily seas were calm. They closed over the whirling vortex where a denizen of

the lightless depths was returning to those distant, subterranean caverns—returning as food for what other voracious monsters might still exist.

Mickey was enveloped in a hug with Minnie and Vinnie, all of them trembling anew in a fresh reaction from the horror they had escaped, when a small boat drew alongside, shining a spotlight on them.

"They're safe!" a hoarse voice bellowed back to the destroyer, and a lemuran came climbing up a rope where they had launched the lifeboat.

And now, as one in a dream, Mickey allowed Minnie and Vinnie to be gently taken from xalv, to be lowered to the waiting boat, while other soldiers came up to help xalv, and, when they realized their presence, the other survivors, who were trickling hesitantly out of the wireless room. Mickey clambered down with the help of the sailors, suddenly finding xallix limbs weak and shaking, and it was with a dreadful silence that they were all rowed across to the destroyer.

"Thank God!" shouted down Brent, as he met them at the rail.

"You're safe, old enby ... and M. Mallaire, Mx. Violinist,... all of you! You let off that rocket just in time; we couldn't pick you up with

our light—" He stopped suddenly, and added instead, "And now we're going back; back to San Diego at full speed. The Admiral wants a word of mouth report."

Mickey stilled him with a heavy gesture. "Just let me go to sleep." Xal said dully. "Let me forget ... forget!... Good God, can we ever forget—" Xal stumbled forward, heedless of Brent's arm across xallix shoulders, while a swarm of surgeon's assistants descended upon them all.

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Admiral Pete Struthers, U.Q.N., leaned back from his desk and blew a cloud of smoke thoughtfully toward the ceiling. He looked silently from Mickey and Minnie to Commander Brent.

"If either one of you had come to me with such a report," he said finally, "I would have found it incredible; I would have thought you were entirely insane, or trying some wild hoax."

"I wish it were a damn lie," said Mickey quietly. "I wish I didn't have to believe it." There were new lines about the black eyes behind those glasses, lines that spoke what the lips would not confess -- of sleepless nights and the impress of a picture xal could not erase.

Minnie fared no better.

"Well, we have kept it out of the papers," said the Admiral stiffly, uncomfortable with the clear trauma the two had faced. "Said it was a derelict, and the wild messages floating about were from an inexperienced man, frightened and irresponsible. Bad advertising—very—for the passenger lines."

"Quite," Commander Brent agreed, trying to inject some lightheartedness into the room, "but of course Mvr. Mouse-Mallaire-Violinist and M. Mallaire-Mouse-Violinist may want to use this in their next book of travel. They have earned the right without doubt."

"I won't stay silent on this, Admiral." Mickey said tiredly, "I told you, Brent, there was often a factual basis for fables—remember? Well, we have proved that. And its time this myth was brought forward as the truth. Studying these creatures is the only way we can protect others in the future--" A light step sounded in the corridor beyond, interrupting xallix thought.

Everyone rose politely as Vinnie Violinist-Mallaire-Mouse entered the room.

"Ah, welcome! You've reminded me," said the Admiral with an

engaging smile, "of the matter of a certain bet. Mvr. Mouse-Mallaire-Violinist — congratulations, by the way — has won handily, and xal has taught me a lesson."

He took a check book from his desk. "What charity would you like to name, Vinnie? That was left to you, you remember."

"Send it to a group of marine biologists who will be willing to study those creatures." said Vinnie gravely. "You will know who best to choose, if you two are really serious about that silly bet."

"That bet, my dear," said Mickey, now with smiling eyes despite their tiredness, "was very serious..."

Minnie added, moving forward to land a kiss on Vinnie's cheek, "And it has had most serious consequences."

Vinnie blushed and smiled.

As one, the three micean turned to the waiting men and waved in cheerful farewell as Minnie and Vinnie started out the door, hand in hand, with only Mickey pausing to say back into the room, "We are flying to Asia, Minnie, Vinnie and I," Mickey told them by way of explanation. "Just rambling around a bit. Our honeymoon, you

know. Look us up if you're cruising out that way."

083: Alterhuman Advancements April 2124

Neopronouns: grey/greys/greysself which follow the same rules as it/its/itself

Replace it with grey

Replace its with greys

Replace itself with greysself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Grey is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as grey gets a fence set up around greys yard so the puppy can go outside without grey having to walk it. Greys uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting grey use, since grey lost greys. Grey's going to buy toys and train the puppy greysself."

083: Alterhuman Advancements April 2124

A Day at the Fair, by Kat Jones.

It was a warm April day in Hayfield when I sat down with Lucifer Morningstar to talk about alterations, gender, and a little bit of romance.

Lucifer Morningstar, as you may have heard, was one of the first ‘Cyberfurries’, as they are commonly called, to be given wings.

Lucifer, who describes greysself as a nonbinary demiboy, uses the pronouns grey/greys/greysself, was the third Cyberfurry to get wings that could be moved and be controlled like a real muscle, rather than just being able to do a few pre-programmed motions with a switch. (See: Interview With an Alterist Vampire for more information on the earlier-released limited-motion wings)

Now before my readers get too excited, we do have to clarify that, while Lucifer’s wings are very impressive and state of the art, like the earlier models, they’re still not functional for flying, which is just how Lucifer likes it.

“I’m scared of heights,” grey told me, “Like, seriously terrified. I

don't even like going up on ladders to get things from high shelves. I didn't want to get wings hoping to be able to actually fly with them, I just want wings because, well, I mean, look at them!" [Grey flared greys wings for emphasis, showing off the way the iridescent red feathers shone in the sunlight.

They stretch from tip to tip as far as grey's outstretched hands, much too small for powered flight when you don't have hollow bones and the wings aren't designed to be functional in the first place.

"If they're able to invent wings in the next few years that would enable you to fly, would you get the upgrade?" I asked.

Lucifer shrugged, folding greys wings back across greys back. Grey was only lightly clothed, leaving the red and black fur that now covered greys body to do most of the modesty work and temperature regulation. I was definitely jealous of greys built-in sunscreen and air conditioning, since the sun that day was ready to bake you if you didn't sit in the shade when the breezes stopped.

Since it was a medieval fair where I met grey, grey was dressed for the occasion: Shining gold-like armour over one arm and half of greys chest, with a seemingly solid gold sickle-like sword to match (carefully dulled, not actually dangerous except as a blunt

instrument), and knee length breeches meant to mimic the style that would have been worn by medieval nobles. Lucifer also had a full-sized metal shield with greys own heraldic design on it: four alternating black and red checkers separated by bands of gold, with a metallic gold sun in the center.

“You know, to fit my name, Morningstar.” grey said, when I asked how grey’d chosen the design. “And to match my fur colors. It’s pretty unmistakable.”

I asked if grey had signed up for any of the tournaments at the festival, but grey said no, the armour and weapon were just for fun, grey wasn’t actually interested in any fighting, artistically staged or not. What grey was interested in though were the costume contests, and the Cyberfurry showoffs.

Lucifer was far from the only Cyberfurry to show up to this festival, and I was fortunate enough to have a chance to talk with many of them throughout the day, and you’ll get to read some sections of their interviews in other sections in this edition.

I asked Lucifer what made grey choose to get alterations, and grey replied, “I mean, who wouldn’t want to when it’s free?” Grey threw out an arm and struck a pose for emphasis.

I reminded grey that there were a lot of people who didn't want them, even though they were free. Some just because they didn't want to, others because they thought it was a form of moral deprivation. I'm personally waiting until they're advanced enough that I can change the colors at a whim rather than having to physically get new fur or feathers or scales each time. But a lot of people don't want alterations at all.

“Well, they don't count.” Lucifer laughed. “I got them because I've always been a fan of anthro characters, and getting the chance to look this awesome is just something I couldn't pass up. Especially since I didn't have to pay for any of it, and the research is going to a good cause.”

(Many of the techniques used for creating Cyberfurry alterations are being used in research to create brand new organs for people who need them rather than having to wait for a transplant from a compatible donor)

I asked Lucifer to describe to me greys final design in greys own words.

“I like to call myself a demiboy deminicat.” grey replied cheerfully. “I went with mostly black fur because I've always been a goth, you

can see from my old pictures, here—” [Lucifer got out greys phone to show me an old pre-alteration photo] “I got red highlights, and gold for my eyes and accessories, like my armour. I think sticking to three main colors gives you a really clear recognizably, though of course I’ve seen a ton of sparkledogs that look absolutely amazing too. Have you spoken to Sophie yet?”

Sophie is Lucifer’s partner, and I had met her briefly, but she had been waiting for her turn in one of the tournaments, so we hadn’t been able to talk long. I told Lucifer this, and grey said, “Oh well then you know what she’s done with her feathers. She’s probably the most colorful Cyberfurry I’ve met, and she just looks fantastic.”

[Below is pictured Sophie and Lucifer posing for my camera together from later in the day. Lucifer is the black and red demonocat giving Sophie bunny ears, Sophie is the pastel rainbow harpy puffing up all her facial feathers to look funny]

“So what exactly is a demonocat?” I asked.

“Well, it’s a combination of a demon and cat. You can see I’ve got cat ears, eyes, and fur, with digitigrade legs and the paw pads to match” (grey held up one foot to show the pink toe beans on the bottom, and demonstrated sheathing and unsheathing the red claws

on greys hands) “but I’ve also got the horns of a demon and wings, though I went with feathered rather than the leathery wings most other demon-themers pick. I like feathers better, they’re nice and soft.”

Standing upright, Lucifer is about six feet tall, with black fur on greys arms and legs, with red on grey chest and belly, hands, and feet, sort of like the points on a Siamese cat. Greys eyes have slitted pupils like a cats, and are bright gold. Grey had large pointed cats ears, which can be swiveled and folded at will, just like a regular cat, and passively enhance greys directional hearing from their shape helping to funnel more sound into the ear.

In the center of greys forehead are two large horns that sweep back, with segmented rings sort of like a a spingbok antelope. Grey has a black tail that ends in a tuft of red fur like a lion, and greys shoulders, which I can see for myself, and thighs, as grey tells me, are speckled with more red against the black.

“Black and red have always been my favorite color combination” grey explained, “and with the gold added it just looks even cooler.”

“Is your design based on or inspired by any particular characters from your childhood?” I asked. [If you missed my interview with

Zenaida Darwin, whose Cyberfurry design is based on Kalis from The Peacekeeper's Logs, check out last month's edition on our website]

“No, not really, unless my own original characters count.” Lucifer replied, “I was always drawing in school, even when I wasn't supposed to be. For my final design you see here, I picked my favorite traits of every character I'd ever designed. Fur is a must, wings are a must, and the black and red is just too cool to go without.”

Moving on from the specifics of alteration design, we started talking about greys gender identity.

“What does being a demiboy mean to you?” I asked, “Could you explain it for our readers?”

Lucifer answered, “I'm not sure I'm really good at explaining it, but I'll try. There are a lot of ways to be a demiboy, so my answer isn't going to apply to everyone, it's just how I define my own experience. Basically, growing up, I knew I wasn't a girl or a woman, and I also definitely wasn't a man, but I was sort of kind of a boy? Which if you think about it is a different gender from man – there's a whole different set of expectations and rules around being a

boy and being a man. So I'm partially a boy, and partially something else that's nonbinary, but I'm not a man. Definitely never a man. I usually don't like being called things like 'guy' or 'dude', but I'm fine with being called a boy, and some androgynous terms."

"How did you figure out you were a demiboy?"

"Mostly I just needed to learn that the term existed. I'd already figured it out pretty much for myself, I just didn't know there was already an actual word for it until I met some friends online who were talking about it. It really just clicked as soon as I heard their description, and I knew that's what I was."

"No moments of doubt? No questioning?"

"No, not really, not for this at least. But a lot of my friends will tell you openly that they really struggled to figure out their gender. Others knew it as soon as they remember thinking. It's different for everyone, there's no one true way to figure out your gender identity or whether you're trans or not."

"What made you choose the pronouns grey/greys/greyself?"

"I just think they sound really cool, and they kind of highlight the

grey area my gender's in,. Not a lot of people understand what I mean when I tell them I'm a demiboy, so sometimes it feels like a little bit of a mystery.”

“Did you use any other pronouns before settling on these ones? Besides the ones you were assigned at birth?”

“Oh boy did I. I went through at least a dozen before I decided to keep these ones. It was really fun just testing them all out with friends to see which ones I wanted. It took about two years after I decided to change my pronouns to finally settling on grey/greys, and now I've had them for five years , with no plans to change them any time soon.”

“What do you do if you meet someone who doesn't use your pronouns?”

“Well, it depends on why they're not using them. If they're just not sure how to use them, I'll teach them. If they refuse to use them because they're just a bigot and don't want to learn, I'll just not talk to them.”

“Have you met anyone else who uses the same pronouns?”

“Online? A few. IRL? Not yet!”

“Ever see any fictional characters with your pronouns?”

“Not so far, unless I or a friend was the one who wrote it.”

“Would you say learning how to use neopronouns was difficult for you?”

“I mean, in the beginning I was pretty intimidated, but then a friend explained how they really work, just following the same rules as other pronouns in English, and I started practicing, and it became really easy. I can pretty much learn any set immediately without too much trouble now. My only problem is figuring out how to pronounce people’s emoji pronouns if they don’t specify first. And sometimes people spell their pronouns the same, but pronounce them completely differently. I have two friends who spell their pronouns X E, but one pronounces it ze, and the other pronounces it “zhi”. That was a little confusing at first when we started meeting up IRL.”

We decided to walk around together a bit, and Lucifer led the way since grey was more familiar with the festival’s layout than I was. Grey showed me the face painting booths, where I got the star pattern you can see below.

[Pictured: me, sticking my tongue out at the camera, with gold stars and sparkles painted on my cheeks, while Leeko the Clown poses next to me with two thumbs up. Lucifer took the picture for us.]

Lucifer took me on a tour of the festival grounds while grey explained why grey'd chosen such a distinctive, and many have said blasphemous, name.

"I've never been religious," grey said, "I didn't really get it. For the longest time after I found out the tooth fairy wasn't real, I actually assumed that it was the same way with God and the Devil, people just told stories to keep kids in line. I assumed no one actually believed it, like how only kids believe in the tooth fairy. It took me a surprisingly long time to figure out that most people who talk about god actually believe in him. It pretty much blew my mind. Anyways, I picked the name Lucifer, because I mean, I went to Sunday school with everyone else in my neighborhood, and if I had to pick between being on the side of the guy who drowns everyone, or the guy who gives you knowledge, I'm going with the guy who lets you learn stuff. Plus, my teachers always said there was something of the devil about me, which they meant as an insult, but I've decided to take it as a compliment. Also, it's just a cool sounding name, and it fits my theme of demon cat."

We paused the interview for a little so that Lucifer could join in with the costume contest. I waited in the bleachers with the rest of the spectators while grey and dozens of other contestants were called out one at a time to show off their outfits.

[You can watch the official video of the competition for free on Hayfield Hayday's website, and there's a lot of personal uploads available elsewhere on the web too.]

A lot of people had their own fake swords and heraldic shields, some professionally made like Lucifer's, others made by hand out of cardboard or painted foam. There were three main categories: one for everyone altogether, then one for unaltered people, and one for Cyberfurries. Then these were broken up into smaller themes: Knights, dragons, royalty, jesters, and more.

The youngest contestant was 6, the oldest was in his 80s.

The overall winner was two teenagers who'd hand-sewn an entire two-person dragon costume with posable wings, head, and tail, with each different scale made up of every pattern fabric you can imagine. They even had their own theme song they played on one of their phones as they ran a practiced circuit around the field showing off their teamwork. The six year old, who was dressed up like a

hellhound, came in 2nd.

Lucifer came in 5th place for the cyberfurry knights, and was grinning ear to ear and cheering for everyone else the whole time.

The posable wings, which were still considered a novelty, were a huge hit.

After the contest, we met up with Sophie, as you saw in the photo above, and the two shared fun stories of their dating history with me.

They'd originally become friends at this same festival ten years ago, before any cybernetic alterations had been released, but they'd already both been part of the furry fandom already, and met when they were dressed as their original characters, back then made out of carefully crafted foam, plaster, and fake fur. Today, they grow their own fur and feathers.

Unlike Lucifer, Sophie is excited by the prospect of being able to upgrade her wings in the future for ones that will allow her to fly by herself.

I asked them each what it was like dating a Cyberfurry, and they both said it wasn't really that much different from dating anyone

else, except sometimes you got your Cyberfurry datemate new sets of grooming tools for feathers or fur, or a digital upgrade pack as gifts rather than roses or boxes of chocolate, though those were involved too.

It wasn't long before Sophie had to leave to join in for the next tournament, so Lucifer and I walked together until we came to the petting zoo.

“Did you struggle with finding a dating pool after you got alterations?” I asked while a baby goat literally climbed on top of grey's shoulders. Lucifer had explained that while grey and Sophie had been friends for years, they hadn't started romantically dating until fairly recently, and that they'd both gone through multiple partners until now.

“Not really” grey said, “Anyone I'd be interested in dating in the first place had to be okay with me being a cyberfurry and a demiboy, so getting such blatant alterations actually made dating easier. Now I don't have to worry as much about people skipping out once I explain my gender to them. If they're cool with fur and wings, they're usually cool with demiboys too. And if they're not, that's their loss, and my gain.”

“What do you see yourself doing in the future? You told me right now you’re an apprentice blacksmith, right? Do you plan on continuing that?”

“Oh, definitely. I love being able to make such cool stuff myself. I do want to try and get better at drawing, though, I think it’d be pretty fun to draw drawing a graphic novel some day.”

“What would the plot be?”

“”I’ll let you know when I figure that out.”

[Pictured: Lucifer crouching in the animal pen, with two brown and white baby goats balanced on greys back, and other attempting to eat greys pant leg. Lucifer is shrugging comically in a ‘what can you do?’ kind of way.]

The sun was starting to set by the time we left the petting zoo, so Lucifer and I said our goodbyes, and made plans to try and meet again if I ever came to the festival again next year, which I’m certainly looking forward to.

To read Lucifer’s version of our adventure together at the fair, you can follow the link at the top of the article to go to grey’s V-log!

084: The Griffon's Curse

Neopronouns: she/shim/her/shimself, faal/fala/faell/faelen/falsel, zae/zaen/zaez/zaensel, and dae/daes/daesel

she/shim/her/shimself

Replace he with she

Replace him with shim

Replace his with her

Replace himself with shimself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since she lost her. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

faal/fala/faell/faelen/falsel

Replace she with faal

Replace him with fala

Replace his with faell

Replace hers with faelen

Replace himself with falsel

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Faal is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as faal gets a fence set up around faell yard so the puppy can go outside without fala having to walk it. Faell uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting fala use, since faal lost faell. Faal's going to buy toys and train the puppy falaself."

zac/zaen/zaez/zaenself

Replace he with zac

Replace him with zaen

Replace his with zarz

Replace himself with zaenself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Zae is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as zae gets a fence set up around zaez yard so the puppy can go outside without zaen having to walk it. Zaez uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting zaen use, since zae lost zaez. Zae's going to buy toys and train the puppy zaenself."

dae/daes/daeself

Replace it with dae

Replace its with daes

Replace itself with daeself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Dae is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as dae gets a fence set up around daes yard so the puppy can go outside without dae having to walk it. Daes uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting dae use, since dae lost daes. Dae's going to buy toys and train the puppy daeself."

084: The Griffon's Curse

“Are you really just going to ignore me, after everything that happened yesterday?” Zaez voice came from behind her, and she froze, fela, on her shoulder, giving a startled, guilty cheep that betrayed a depth of emotion she would rather have kept hidden.

Drawing her wings in self-consciously close against her back, she turned slowly, unhappy to do so, but knowing that doing anything else she could do would just make it worse.

Zae stood there, just a few steps away, just where the path along the cliff face went around the bend. Two steps backward, and zae would be out of sight completely, she would have had no way of knowing zae was there. Dae crouched behind zaez feet, wide, golden eyes beseeching fela openly on her shoulder.

That wasn't helping him feel any better.

For a few seconds she just stood there, unable to think of anything to say, so that the only sounds were the wind rushing over the snow, and the sound of her own heartbeat within her chest.

“Well?” Zae demanded, when the silence stretched for too long. Zae took a step forward just as a fresh gust of wind came through, sending zaez long red fur, and zaez familiar and anxious scent

twisting in the air towards shim, like the mountain itself was demanding answers. “Are you going to say something?”

Dae skipped forward a little and fluttered daes yellow-gold wings, flashing the cyan spots in the sunlight as dae gave a mournful cry.

Despite sher wishes, faal answered it with faell own, betraying exactly how upset she was, though she would have traded anything to be able to play it cool.

“I don’t know what *to* say!” she exclaimed, feeling sher face burn beneath sher fur in a shamed blush.

Zae moved closer again, reaching one hand out to brace on the rock wall. To sher mortification, faal leapt down from sher shoulder and ran to meet dae in the middle.

Zae looked pointedly away from their affectionate dragons as the two nuzzled eachother and began to anxiously preen eachother’s feathers, saying in a rough voice as zae looked intently at zaez claws on the rock face, “You could have told me you were the Shadow Storm.”

She winced, and only resisted the urge to turn and make sure no was one behind him was through a monumental effort. It took an even bigger effort to resist the urge to unfurl her wings and fly away entirely. But that wouldn't help anything. Normal people couldn't fly during this kind of weather, at this time of day. It would just compound the fact that she had lied, that she had kept this secret from the one person she was supposed to trust completely.

The anxiety was already making her heart race in her chest, and she shivered, pulling her arms across her chest self-consciously, gripping tightly to try and ward off the panic. "I can't tell anyone." She said desperately, knowing the words were completely inadequate.

"Not even me?" Zaez words could have been a demand, but they came out sounding like nothing but despair.

Faal and dae were still in between them, running their beaks through each other's feathers, giving soft chirps of affection.

She cared about zaen, and zae cared about her. They both knew it.

That didn't make this conversation any easier though.

“I can’t tell *anyone*.” She said again, wholly unable to articulate the sheer magnitude of her statement.

How could words describe the way she felt a pit of fear open up in her stomach at the thought of telling anyone her alter ego?

The curse the griffon had laid on him commanded secrecy, before all else. She couldn’t boast or brag about her accomplishments as the Shadow Storm. She couldn’t use it to gain favor or attention or even to get out of punishments when she was caught seemingly slacking in her duties, while in reality she was off as the Shadow Storm, fighting to protect people.

She had been cursed because of her pride. And the griffon had made sure that she would never be allowed to be proud of being the Shadow Storm. The first thing she had done when she’d gotten back home that first day was try to tell Zaen what had happened, but even just planning the words out in her head had sent her heart racing with anxiety she couldn’t control, and the longer she contemplated the thought, the worse it got, until she’d literally been shaking with the nameless, horrible fear.

She had tried writing it down. She had tried singing it. She had tried making it into a riddle, and even a joke. But every time she tried to

tell zaen, the same terror overwhelmed shim until she couldn't stand it anymore.

She *couldn't* tell anyone.

It was bad enough now that zae knew. It was even worse that she had no way to explain or excuse shimself.

She couldn't even say, 'I wanted to tell you'. All she could say was, 'I can't'.

"Can't, or won't?" Zae closed the distance between them, stepping around their dragons, who happily broke apart and followed in zaez footsteps, pressing their sides together so tightly it was almost like they wanted to fuse into a single being, both still making small sounds of anxiety, though faal at this point was visibly quivvering with the fear she felt eating at her heart.

"I can't. Tell. *Anyone*." She said again, desperate. She found shimself backing up as zae approached, instinctively trying to get away from what the griffon's spell was screaming at shim was a threat.

Zae knew, and could tell anyone zae wanted to, and there would be nothing she could do to stop zaen. She didn't want to find out what would happen if the griffon's plan were unraveled like that. She didn't want anyone to know, but it wouldn't be up to shim. Zae could tell anyone zae wanted.

She felt the back of sher legs hit the stone steps leading up to the school, and fumbled backward with an arm to find the railing. "Please, don't tell anyone." she begged.

Zae had stopped when zae realized she was backing away, and now zae just stood there, staring at shim, expression more hurt than she could ever remember seeing zaen.

Zae said, in a suddenly choked voice, "I wouldn't betray you like that. I can't even believe you think I would." Dae gave a little cry to match zaez obvious sorrow.

She was suddenly even more strongly gripped by the urge to flee, and damn the consequences. Sher heart was pounding in sher chest so hard she almost thought it would burst out and into the air. Faal broke away from dae and fanned faell wings with a high keen.

All her logical reasons for not doing it didn't seem to matter anymore. Zae knew. Seeing even more proof wouldn't make that knowledge more real in any way. It was already real. Zae already knew. There was nothing she could do to stop Zae from telling anyone. Even just the fact that Zae knew was like a dagger of fear in her heart. She hated that griffon so much. Why had she ever accepted the dare to raid its eyrie?

Zae must have seen what she was planning, because Zae stepped forward suddenly, hand outstretched, crying, "Wait!"

But it was too late. She had already been cloaked in the roaring shadows of her curse and was in the air, shooting straight upward in a maneuver that no one else could even dream of matching. It was impossible for a normal person to fly like this in good weather, let alone during the most turbulent time of the day. It didn't matter. Zae already knew. There was nothing she could do to change that.

All she could do was follow the terror in her heart, laid there by the griffon's curse, and fly as far and fast as her cursed wings would take her, until the fear receded enough to let her come back.

She could only hope and pray that Zae would keep her word not to tell anyone else. Otherwise, she knew in her heart that she would

have to fly away again and never be able to look back.

085:

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